

# Sussex hires consultant to study library funding

Analysis mirrors fire department review

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Sussex County has agreed to hire a consultant to study the funding system for public libraries, which receive money from the county library tax to help cover operating expenses.

Work is expected to begin in August on the seven-month project estimated to cost nearly \$100,000, said County Finance Director Gina Jennings.

After county and state contributions, the libraries have to raise funds to cover budget gaps, which range between 13% and 52%, library officials have said.

Before the start of the most recent budget process earlier this year, nearly all the independent libraries asked for an increase in the library tax collected by the county, which had not been raised for almost 20 years.

In a Jan. 22 letter, 10 of the 11 independent libraries asked the county librarian to request that county council double the tax rate to 0.0046 cents per \$100 of property value. That would raise about \$2.5 million more annually.

Increasing the library tax would result in a bill of \$18.20 per year for a property assessed at \$400,000. The bill for any particular property would vary, depending on its assessment.

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The independent libraries now receive a total of about \$3.1 million annually and divide that amount among themselves. There are also three county libraries that are operated and funded separately by the county: Milton, Greenwood and South Coastal in Bethany Beach.

Revenue from the library tax has risen from \$1.9 million to \$3 million, or by 54%, since 2008, which has kept pace with the rate of inflation, Jennings said in February. The cost of operating facilities and providing programs is rising faster than the rate of inflation, library officials said at a March 17 council meeting.

Council did not change the library tax in the budget, but in a July 10 email, Jennings informed library officials that consultant Berry, Dunn, Mc-Neil & Parker LLC was hired to conduct a review.

Jennings noted that it had been 10 years since the county thoroughly reviewed the funding formula and more than 20 years since the system was reviewed by an independent group.

"Because a decent amount of time has passed since these reviews, the county is willing to fund a countywide library study," Jennings told the libraries in her July 10 email.

She compared the study to a review of fire department finances conducted at the direction of the state for all three counties.

The study found ambulance services operated by volunteer fire departments had created the most significant financial strain.

That led to the county to include nearly \$2 million in its Fiscal Year 2027 budget to help fire departments pay for ambulance replacements on a rotating schedule and to hire a consultant to assist fire departments with ambulance service billing.

“Just as we did with the fire companies and their study, the county believes it is prudent to review county-funded systems that have been in place for decades before considering significant changes or requests for additional revenue,” Jennings said.

During a June 16 public hearing on the budget draft, Candace Vessella, chair of the Sussex County Library Advisory Board, urged council to increase the library tax. If that was not done, she asked the county to create a working group, like the one that last year drafted recommendations for county land-use reforms, to study library finances.

The county instead chose to hire a consultant to conduct a review.

“I am grateful to the county officials for approving resources to study the needs of the 11 underfunded independent libraries,

in concert with the overall funding provided to all public libraries in the county,” Vessella wrote in a July 25 email.

“I am cautiously optimistic that when the study is completed, the need for an increase to the library tax will be considered and approved by the county council in the FY 2028 budget cycle, which will facilitate the critically needed funds for these vital public institutions,” she added.

The county needs to show it is spending tax dollars efficiently and consider ways of saving money before increasing taxes, Jennings told library officials July 10. The study will also compare the funding system in Sussex County with those elsewhere.

“This study will enable the county to assess current service delivery among the libraries it supports and whether the existing funding model is sustainable,” Lisa Paradis, a principal for Berry, Dunn, McNeil & Parker, wrote in a project summary.

“Our team will assess existing service delivery, community demand and system performance across both the county and its partner libraries, and will identify opportunities to strengthen coordination, improve service outcomes and help ensure the long-term sustainability of the model,” Paradis added.

Vessella said she did a preliminary analysis of the library funding and found significant disparities.

Comparing a sampling of independent library budgets to county library figures, she found county library staff base salaries are 37% higher than their independent library counterparts.

County library employees receive benefits, such as healthcare and pensions, while independent libraries provide no more than a small stipend to help employees pay for healthcare, she said. While the county maintains the three county libraries’ facilities, the independent libraries are responsible for their own maintenance expenses, Vessella said.



**SUSSEX COUNTY** has hired a consultant to study the finances of the 11 independent libraries in the county, including Lewes Public Library, shown on the morning of July 27. The study is planned after officials of most of those libraries asked for an increase in the county library tax. PHOTO BY KEVIN T. CONLON