

Why Sussex County Has Not Converted Independent Libraries to County Operation

One of the primary reasons Sussex County has not converted the eleven independent libraries into county-operated libraries is the significant increase in costs such a transition would require.

The current operating budgets of the independent libraries would need to be expanded to provide employee health insurance, pension benefits, and salary scales comparable to those received by County employees. These additional personnel costs alone would represent a substantial financial commitment.

Beyond personnel expenses, the County would also assume responsibility for capital repairs, building improvements, and long-term facility maintenance—costs that are currently funded and managed by the independent library organizations. Incorporating these ongoing obligations into the County budget would make a full conversion to County ownership and operation considerably more expensive than simply designating the libraries as County assets.

In total, the County would become responsible for maintaining an additional 196,454 square feet of library facilities. Like the County's three existing county-operated libraries, these buildings would require continuous maintenance, capital planning, and periodic major investments, creating significant long-term financial obligations.

Why Converting Eleven Independent Libraries to County-Run Status Is So Complex

This question comes up regularly because Sussex County's library system is unusual compared with many other counties in Delaware and neighboring states.

The short answer is that most Sussex County libraries are independent nonprofit corporations, not county departments. The county helps fund them and coordinates countywide library services, but it does not own or operate them. Only three libraries are county-operated enterprises because of historical decisions made when those libraries were established or later assumed by the county.

Why only three county-run libraries?

The distinction is largely historical rather than based on policy.

Sussex County's 14 public libraries developed over many decades in different communities. Most were founded by:

- local civic groups,
- library associations,
- women's clubs,
- municipalities, or
- independent nonprofit boards.

When Sussex County later developed a countywide library system, it generally did not absorb ownership of those existing institutions. Instead, the county:

- provides operating support,
- administers county library funding,
- coordinates technology and shared services,
- works with the Delaware Division of Libraries,
- allows each library's board to retain local control.

As a result, most libraries continue to have:

- their own governing board,
- their own employees,
- ownership of their buildings,
- independent nonprofit status.

The three county-operated libraries are the exception because Sussex County directly owns and operates them as county government facilities.

Why not convert the other eleven?

There are several reasons.

1. Local governance

Many communities value having a local board that can make decisions about:

- programming,
- staffing,
- fundraising,
- building improvements,
- community priorities.

A county takeover would transfer much of that authority to county government.

2. Property ownership

Many library buildings are owned by:

- nonprofit corporations,
- municipalities,
- trusts,
- or were donated with conditions attached.

Ownership would have to be transferred or leased to Sussex County.

3. Employees

Independent libraries employ their own staff.

If Sussex County assumed operation, questions would arise regarding:

- county employment,

- salaries,
- pensions,
- benefits,
- seniority,
- collective personnel policies.

These are significant administrative changes.

4. Fundraising

Independent libraries often receive:

- donations,
- endowments,
- memorial gifts,
- Friends of the Library support.

Some donors prefer supporting a locally governed institution rather than a county department.

Q: What would it take?

Converting the remaining eleven libraries into county-operated facilities would likely require several coordinated steps:

- Each library board would have to agree to relinquish operational control.
- Property ownership or long-term control would need to be transferred to Sussex County.
- The county would need appropriate funding for direct operation of the additional libraries.
- Staff would need to transition into county employment or be rehired.
- Existing nonprofit corporations would likely dissolve or redefine their role (for example, becoming Friends organizations).
- Agreements with the Delaware Division of Libraries would need to be updated.
- In some cases, municipal governments might also have to approve changes if they currently own buildings or contribute funding.

No single vote by Sussex County Council could simply "take over" the independent libraries.

Would state legislation be required?

Probably not in most cases.

Because Sussex County already operates public libraries, expanding that role could largely be accomplished through:

- agreements between the county and each library,
- county budget decisions,

- property transfers,
- employment transitions.

However, legislation might be needed if changes affected statewide library governance or funding formulas.

Q: What are the advantages of county management?

Supporters often argue that county operation could provide:

- more consistent staffing and compensation,
- standardized services,
- centralized purchasing,
- easier long-term capital planning,
- more equitable resource distribution across the county.

Q: What are the advantages of the current model?

Supporters of the current arrangement point to:

- stronger local community ownership,
- boards that understand neighborhood needs,
- greater flexibility,
- successful local fundraising,
- preservation of each library's unique identity.

Q: Is a full county system likely?

A: It is possible but would probably happen gradually rather than all at once. Historically, library systems tend to consolidate only when:

- an independent library requests county assistance because of financial or governance challenges,
- a building requires major capital investment beyond the nonprofit's means,
- or both the library board and the county conclude that direct county management would better serve the community.

Absent those circumstances, there has generally been little momentum among Sussex County's independent library boards to give up local governance, especially since the existing partnership model already provides county funding and countywide services while preserving local control.