RAILS

REACHING ACROSS ILLINOIS LIBRARY SYSTEM

June 13, 2025

TO: RAILS Board of Directors

FROM: Monica Harris, Executive Director

SUBJECT: FY2026 Operational Plan and Budget Overview

This memo is intended as a general overview of the proposed RAILS Operational Plan for Fiscal Year FY2026. You will also find a rigorously detailed budget narrative in this packet, prepared by RAILS Finance Manager Sharon Swanson.

At our April and May meetings, I presented an overview of the initiatives included in the Draft Operational Plan for FY2026. These initiatives directly respond to member needs as detailed in our strategic plan, as well as our purpose as described in the Illinois Library System Act.

Revenue:

I wish to extend our thanks to the Illinois Secretary of State, Alexi Giannoulias, for the System Area and Per Capita (SAPC) grant funding that RAILS received in FY2025. The Illinois State Library has instructed us to submit an operational plan and budget based on an annual revenue of $11,871,714, which is funding from the System Area and Per Capita Grant.

As a reminder, this does not include additional projected revenue of approximately $5.1 million, consisting chiefly of reimbursement revenue, fees from services and materials (including eRead Illinois and the Illinois Library Delivery Services [ILDS] contract), and investment income of approximately $877,000.

Expenditure:

In today's environment of rising costs, we remain committed to providing optimized services while maximizing value for our member libraries. This necessitates continued prudence in budgetary planning, particularly considering anticipated increases for personnel, utilities, vehicles, and facilities. Our strategic focus on sustainability aligns with this objective, ensuring resources are directed towards meeting the evolving needs of our members, as detailed in the strategic plan.

To that end, our service expansion is focused on:

- Resource sharing
- Infrastructure and administrative for RAILS staff and programs

Highlights are as follows:

Resource Sharing:

Resource sharing is our primary goal under the Illinois Library System Act and the RAILS Strategic Plan (2022-2025). We work in service of this goal in many ways by supporting the resource sharing of materials through library consortia through our LLSAP support grants, delivery of materials throughout our service area, continuing education, consulting, cooperative purchasing, and the maintenance of our many statewide programs including eRead Illinois, Explore More Illinois, and Find More Illinois.

We are continuing to anticipate the growth of in-state travel and in-person visits to member libraries this year, in keeping with the trends we have observed in FY2025. Our members appreciate opportunities to interact with RAILS staff in a face-to-face environment.

Replacement vehicles continue to be a top priority, and the purchase of four additional vehicles has been budgeted in FY2026.

We continue to hear from members about the importance of offering opportunities for training and learning related to leadership development. We are budgeting $15,000 to administer a leadership training program, Catalyst, for libraries of all types.

As part of our commitment to excellent training for RAILS member staff, we will be introducing Niche Academy ($41,800) as a learning platform for all RAILS members.

We want to continue to ensure our eRead Illinois program will provide maximum impact to users. Costs to administer this program are maintained by RAILS, and participant fees directly support the purchase of eBooks and audiobooks in the shared collection. RAILS is budgeting $100,000 to meet this increased need and increase the impact of the collection for all participants.

Our current strategic plan ends in 2025, so we are budgeting $35,000 for the creation of a new strategic plan.

As we work to create artificial intelligence (AI) procedures for RAILS staff in FY2026, we will build an AI Ambassador program to foster engaged knowledge of and practical insights about the use of AI in library settings.

We are budgeting for increased spending (approximately $15,000) around digital accessibility for RAILS, including additional captioning for video content.

RAILS will enlist a consultant ($10,000) to consider additional efficiencies at our Bolingbrook hub with the new working model to make sure we are considering the best possible workflow with the new sorting model there.

Infrastructure Support and Administrative Support:

The budget includes the FY2025 addition of staff members at our Bolingbrook location to support the increased sorting function. The impact of this change was approximately $495,600, including salary and salary-related expenditures. This change allowed for additional control over our sorting operation, allowing for more accurate sorting and was considerably offset by change with our outsourced delivery contract with CTL.

Over the last decade, we have been able to attract and retain an exceptional staff and it is essential that our salaries remain competitive so that we can continue to do so. A system-wide 4% cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) increase has been included to keep pace with Consumer Price Index (CPI) increases in order to remain competitive. The total cost of a 4% raise is approximately $236,200, including salaries and benefits.

We are also requesting the continuation of the successful temporary Data and Communications internships at 15 hours a week for six months for both positions. The impact of these positions is approximately $17,198, including salary and salary -related expenditures. We also incorporated the continuation of a temporary part-time cataloging services assistant for the World Language Cataloging program.

Healthcare costs continue to increase, with an overall increase of roughly 11% in health insurance rates for the second half of the year.

We expect increases in several areas related to maintaining facilities and services, including contractual services, property and casualty insurance rates, office supplies and equipment, headset and hardware replacement, legal fees, and lease renewals.

RAILS completed our Capital Assessment for our Burr Ridge building in FY2024. We will begin work on some areas that were scheduled in that plan for FY2026, including chiller replacement,

light fixture and ceiling tile replacement, asphalt replacement, and a server room reconfiguration.

This presentation of the FY2026 Budget and Operational Plan reflects a commitment to both member service and responsible financial stewardship. The plan prioritizes the delivery of relevant and responsive services aligned with the RAILS strategic plan, while maintaining a focus on financial sustainability. I look forward to a productive discussion and your valuable feedback.

RAILS FY2026 System Area and Per Capita Grant Application

2.2 Detailed Budget Narrative

This budget narrative as a component of the Area and Per Capita (APC) grant application provides an overview and a programmatic analysis of the proposed budget that supports our fiscal year (FY) 2026 operational plan. Its purpose is to enhance understanding of the budget components and how the budget supports and aligns with our operational plan. All comparisons made to the prior year budget refer to the FY2025 budget. We have included an attachment showing line-item details of the FY2026 budget and FY2025 budget, with a breakdown by administration, delivery and LLSAP support revenues and expenditures, and a comparison of the two.

Due to the additional APC grant funding that RAILS received from the Illinois Office of the Secretary of State during FY2023, RAILS has and will be able to cover increased expenses, enhance current services, and pursue innovative programs and initiatives for our members in support of our operational plan that is based on our strategic plan. These additional funds assist with:

- Keeping our salaries competitive and our organizational structure sustainable given the ever-changing and increasing service needs from our member libraries
- Expected increases in all insurance costs for calendar year 2026
- Offering grants for libraries that wish to join one of the six Local Library System Automation Programs (LLSAPs) that we support
- Offering grants to libraries, networking groups, and library consortia for continuing education (CE) events with a priority around EDI-related topics
- Supporting the growth and sustainability of our group purchases and discounts program to meet the ever-changing needs of our member libraries
- Replacing staff computers throughout the organization
- Procuring transcription services to make our websites and meetings more accessible
- Increased lease expenditures for our Bolingbrook facility for the increased sorting operation

In addition, RAILS continues to support multiple statewide projects, including:

- Providing high-quality delivery services to the Consortium of Academic & Research Libraries in Illinois (CARLI) members via Illinois Library Delivery Service (ILDS)
- Maintaining and developing the Library Learning (L2) website
- Leading and promoting the Find More Illinois (FMI) program
- Offering the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)/Open Meetings Act (OMA) hotline
- Developing and promoting Inkie.org
- Leading the Explore More Illinois program
- Offering the world language cataloging services program
- Leading the SLATE project
- Leading the eRead Illinois program
- Offering the My Library Is grants

- Collaborating with partner organizations to plan networking opportunities, promote availability of statewide electronic resources package, plan Directors University, advocate for more certified school librarians, provide trustee training, and increase broadband access

In FY2026, RAILS is planning to continue to grow the group purchase and discount program, the world language cataloging services program, continuing education for our members by adding a learning platform for member libraries, and promotional support for RAILS and partnership programs. As in prior years, the Federal portion of our APC grant funds ($1,936,143.79) will be used to support our delivery service to our members. A portion of these funds are used for our delivery staff salaries, and the remaining portion is used for our contractual agreement with our delivery outsourcing vendor who provides delivery services to a group of our member libraries.

The FY2025 General Fund was budgeted to have a surplus of $469,100. For FY2026, the General Fund is budgeted to have a surplus of $113,112, but we have several FY2026 purchases planned from our Capital Projects Fund ($699,000) which brings our total FY2026 budget surplus to a $585,888 deficit. The FY2026 budget incorporates several continuing projects from FY2025 at the current level of need as well as several new projects based on member feedback and needs. This budget incorporates many projects that have the flexibility to be one-time or be continued in future fiscal years. Both the world language cataloging services program as well as the maintenance and development of L2 are expected to be funded through separate grants from the Illinois State Library (ISL). The budget that we are presenting includes all the services that RAILS believes we should be providing to our members to meet the operational plan and our strategic plan goals while keeping RAILS' current and newly added services for our member libraries sustainable for the long term.

The FY2025 budget reflects the new delivery services agreement with Continental Transportation Logistics Global Solutions (CTL) that removes sorting services. One of the six LLSAPs that we support, Resource Sharing Alliance (RSA), is moving towards increased independence with an anticipated date to hire their staff of January 1, 2026. The expenditures for the world language cataloging services program and the maintenance and development of L2 have been moved from the General Fund to the Special Revenue Fund to be offset by anticipated grant revenues.

RAILS deferred vehicle purchases for several years due to market shortages, but beginning in FY2024, RAILS has been able to replace over half of its aging delivery fleet with a total of twenty-one vehicles ordered during FY2024 and FY2025. To continue moving towards a regular replacement schedule for our aging fleet, RAILS plans to purchase two replacement delivery vehicles and two replacement passenger vehicles during FY2026.

Summary

The proposed FY2026 operational plan continues its support of programs and activities included in the RAILS operational plan guided by the RAILS Strategic Plan approved by the RAILS Board in January 2022. Major activities include:

- Support for libraries to join LLSAPs/consortia
- System delivery and ILDS
- Find More Illinois
- Maintenance and continued development of L2

RAILS FY2026 System Area and Per Capita Grant Application |June 20, 2025

- Continuing education and training for members, including public library trustees
- Data collection for deals & discounts, delivery, LLSAPs, schools, etc.
- Support for eRead Illinois
- Explore More Illinois
- Group purchases and discounts program
- Grants to members for continuing education events with an EDI focus
- Grants to help show the value of libraries through the My Library Is program
- World language cataloging services and cataloging training for member library staff

As in past years, we used zero-based budgeting, meaning we developed the FY2026 budget from the ground up. We included all activities that we believe are necessary to support our operational and strategic plans.

Revenues

General Fund revenues of $17,029,155 are budgeted to decrease $840,208 from the FY2025 budget. This decrease is primarily due to the decreases in reimbursements ($405,750), fees for services and materials ($328,752), and investment income ($123,000).

Special Revenue Fund activity is budgeted for FY2026, including a grant from the Cook County Digital Equity Fund ($850,000) that RAILS was awarded in May 2025. Funds are expected to be received shortly after a grant agreement is finalized with this work wrapping up by the end of November 2025. RAILS has submitted applications for two technology grants from the ISL for the continued development and maintenance of L2 ($125,859) as well as the world language cataloging services program ($123,834) with revenues from both of these grants also included in this fund.

Expenditures

Budgeted general fund expenditures of $16,916,043 are $484,220 below the FY2025 budgeted amounts. Higher than prior year's expenditures are budgeted in personnel; supplies, postage and printing; buildings and grounds; and travel and continuing education. Budgeted expenditures decreased overall in nearly all other categories, with the largest decreases in contractual services, library materials, vehicle expenses, and professional services.

For the General Fund, we are budgeting total estimated revenues exceeding estimated expenditures by $113,112. Special Revenue Fund revenues offset expenditures for the three programs that are budgeted. We are budgeting $699,000 of expenditures from the Capital Projects Fund, which has no budgeted revenues. As in FY2025, we have budgeted Area and Per Capita grant revenues of $11,871,714, which includes $1,936,144 from the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). FY2026 will be the fifth year of our world language cataloging services program and our continued maintenance and development of the L2 platform that supports the statewide directory of libraries and library learning events in Illinois. Given the history of these grants, we have moved the expenditures for these programs to the Special Revenue Fund with offsetting grant revenues. These applications have been submitted to the ISL and are in the process of being reviewed.

Revenue Details

FY2025 estimated total revenues of $18,128,848 consist of General Fund and Special Revenue Fund revenues.

APC grant revenues ($11,871,714) are budgeted at the FY2025 award amount. The APC grant amount accounts for 69.71% of the General Fund revenue budget. Excluding reimbursement revenues, the percentage increases to 83.47%.

General Fund fees for services and materials of $1,453,347 are budgeted to decrease $328,752 from the FY2025 budget primarily due to a decrease in payments from RSA for RAILS in-kind support costs ($392,630) due to RSA planning to hire their own staff as of January 1, 2026. This decrease is partially offset by the anticipated growth of the FMI program ($32,000), the contractual 4% increase in ILDS contract fees and expected fuel surcharges ($29,718) for statewide delivery, the growth of the eRead Illinois program ($3,000), and the addition of lunch fees to recover RAILS costs for in-person CE events ($840). This was partially offset by a slight decrease in discounted HR Source membership participation ($1,680). Fees included in the budget are:

- ILDS contract fees for statewide delivery to academic institutions ($779,707), billed to offset personnel, contractual services, and overhead costs that are devoted to providing this service
- eRead Illinois membership fees ($488,000), which support purchases of content for the program
- FMI membership fees ($160,000), which partially offset program costs and help to ensure the sustainability of the program
- Discounted HR Source membership for participating libraries ($24,800), billed on a sliding scale that partially offset RAILS' expenditures
- CE lunch fees for in-person library continuing education events ($840) to offset RAILS catering costs

General Fund reimbursements of $2,806,750 are budgeted to decrease $405,750 from the FY2025 budget. The launch of the Statewide Database Package and the selection of EBSCO as the vendor for these databases decreased the activity flowing through RAILS for these core packages ($800,000). RAILS continues to offer additional databases to enhance the state's package. Both this area of the additional EBSCO databases and the rest of the group purchases and discounts program continue to see expansion. Significant increases include an additional $200,000 of anticipated subscriptions for Gale Small Business Builder and Udemy as well as six new products including SWANK for K-12 libraries ($100,000), Fiero Code ($60,000), Chicago Tribune ($60,000), ComicsPlus ($40,000), Media Source ($25,000), and HR Source ($25,000). A placeholder ($100,000) for new products was budgeted for FY2025, but, with more specific needs already identified for FY2026, RAILS does not need to continue this provision. The major group purchases budgeted for FY2026 are the EBSCO databases ($700,000), Communico Cloud ($500,000), several Gale products ($370,000), Brainfuse ($250,000), Press Reader ($230,000), SWANK ($200,000), CreativeBug ($120,000), and JSTOR ($95,000). Amounts budgeted as reimbursement revenues are beneficial to RAILS' members as they provide economies of scale for collaborative purchasing initiatives to help scarce member library dollars stretch as far as possible and to increase resource sharing. These revenues have no impact upon fund balances as they offset corresponding group purchase expenditures.

Investment income of $877,000 is budgeted for FY2026, a decrease of $123,000 from the $1,000,000 budgeted for the prior year. Interest rates are projected to decrease in the next calendar year with the central tendency of the Federal Reserve's projections at their March 2025 meeting ranging between 3.9% and 4.4% for CY2025 and 3.1% and 3.9% for CY2026. To remain conservative but also realistic, RAILS is projecting average interest rates of 3.5% for all of FY2026. This projected interest income also incorporates the advantageous rates that we have locked in with our series of laddered investments. These projections also assume that we will continue to receive APC funding in a pattern sufficient to maintain our current average account balances.

We have hired an outside consultant to restart the E-Rate filing process. As a result, we anticipate the receipt of $14,344 of reimbursements for our internet services.

Prairie Area Library System (PALS), one of our predecessor systems, was the recipient of a donation of a tract of land adjacent to our facility. This land has a billboard, and PALS was able to establish an agreement with an advertising company that has been maintained by RAILS. RAILS expects to receive $1,000 in rental income for the use of the sign which reimburses RAILS for the cost of maintaining the lawn and paying property taxes on this tract of land.

Other revenues are budgeted at $5,000, which increased $2,950 from the FY2025 budget. These are primarily amounts received for the sale of Illinois Library Law books that RAILS purchases for member libraries at the ILA member rate, as well as credit card rebates. Member library book purchases are budgeted conservatively in FY2026, since the last edition was published in January 2024 and purchases have begun to level off.

Expenditure Details

Personnel

General Fund personnel-related expenditures of $7,863,964 are budgeted to increase $302,666, or 4.00%, from the prior year budget. Personnel-related expenditures are budgeted to account for 46.49% of total expenditures, compared to 43.46% in the FY2025 budget, comprising the largest single category of RAILS expenditures. The FY2026 budget for salary expenditures incorporates the following highlights and assumptions:

- The budget incorporates the FY2025 addition of staff members at Bolingbrook to support the increased sorting function including eight additional full-time sorters, one full-time driver floater, and the conversion of a driver position from part-time to full-time. The impact of this change was approximately $495,600, including salary and salary-related expenditures.
- The transition of the ten staff members who serve RSA to direct employment with RSA as of January 1, 2026. The impact of this transition is a $404,392 decrease in salary and salary-related expenditures.
- A system-wide 4% cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) increase has been included to keep pace with Consumer Price Index (CPI) increases and remain competitive. A small number of staff who are covered by a collective bargaining agreement will be awarded increases after negotiations have been concluded. The total impact of this 4% increase is approximately $236,200, including salaries and benefits for existing staff and proposed internship and temporary positions.
- The budget also incorporates the FY2025 change in one full-time driver position at Rockford to part-time and the addition of one full-time driver floater position for the Rockford delivery

operation. The impact of this change was approximately $31,000, including salary and salary-related expenditures.

- With the continued and increased demand for the world language cataloging program, the budget also incorporates the continuation of a temporary part-time cataloging services assistant position. The impact of continuing this position is approximately $27,647, including salary and salary-related expenditures. This position is budgeted in the Special Revenue Fund with the anticipation that it will be covered by the world language cataloging services grant that is currently being reviewed by the ISL.
- The budget incorporates the continuation of the successful and rewarding temporary communications internship as well as the addition of the equally as successful data research internship from FY2024 at a total of 15 hours per week for six months for both internship positions. The impact of these positions is approximately $17,198, including salary and salary-related expenditures.
- The budget also incorporates an adjustment for one existing position to bring it into alignment for equity within the established pay scale following the results of the benchmarking process that was conducted in FY2024. The impact of this change is approximately $15,300, including salary and salary-related expenditures.
- The budget incorporates a salary adjustment for another position that was benchmarked after significant changes to core job responsibilities. The impact of this change was approximately $4,500, including salary and salary-related expenditures.
- The budget incorporates an overall 11.00% anticipated increase in health insurance costs for the second half of FY2026, the most recent open enrollment elections, the addition of delivery staff to support Rockford and Bolingbrook operations, and the transition of RSA staff mid-way through the fiscal year. The impact of these changes was $120,894.

General Fund salary expenditures of $6,032,987 are budgeted to increase by $119,671, or 2.02%, from the prior year budget. Delivery salaries account for $399,821 of this increase and administrative salaries account for $119,210 of the total increase, both are partially offset by a decrease in the LLSAP support (RSA) salaries of $399,360.

The budget for social security taxes ($460,659) increased $9,810, or 2.18% from the similar increase in budgeted salaries and shifts in the number of positions. Unemployment insurance ($36,582) is budgeted to increase $11,956, or 48.55%, due to a higher than anticipated rate increase in CY2025 and another expected increase in CY2026. Since the rate is based on the last three years' experience and does include an experience factor for the state of Illinois as a whole, it can have large fluctuations. Given the current uncertainty around the job market, this anticipated increase allows for wider statewide fluctuations that could occur during CY2025. Worker's compensation expenditures ($157,425) are budgeted to increase $29,608, or 23.16%, due to the increase in budgeted salaries as well as an overall expected 7% increase in rates.

Retirement benefits ($46,925) are budgeted to decrease $2,073, or 4.23% from the FY2025 budget due to the preliminary employer contribution rate remaining at .79% for both CY2025 and CY2026 and the shifts in positions between RSA and delivery. RAILS pension obligations are funded in excess of 100%, resulting in low funding obligations for FY2026 as well as FY2025. RAILS anticipates decreases in our employer reserve that will affect FY2027, including RSA employing their own staff and any dramatic fluctuations in the stock and bond markets that will affect IMRF's investment earnings. IMRF smooths investment earnings fluctuations over five years to keep rates more predictable for employers. RAILS'

funding percentage increased from 109.95% to 112.47% from the end of calendar year 2023 to calendar year 2024.

Health, dental, and life insurance expenditures of $1,042,086 are budgeted to increase $120,894, or 13.12% from the FY2025 budget due to an anticipated 11.00% increase in health insurance premiums for the second half of the year, a 9% increase in dental premiums, and a 2% increase in vision premiums. The insurance cooperative that RAILS participates in experienced an increase in FY2023 of 10.04% for medical premiums and either an 11.38% or 4.81% increase for dental premiums; an increase in FY2024 of 11% for medical premiums and either a 7.45% or 3% increase for dental premiums; and either an increase of 7% or 9% or a decrease of 1.5% for medical premiums as well as an increase of 0% or 15.62% for dental premiums. The increase in this account is significantly higher due to the addition of nine delivery staff at Bolingbrook for the increased sorting operation as well as staff electing higher cost plans overall. This increase is also offset by the transition of the ten staff who service RSA to being hired by RSA on January 1, 2026. The health, dental and life insurance budget is constructed on a departmental and location basis based on the current expenditure levels and adjusted for future cost increases. RAILS is continuing the health reimbursement account (HRA) program, which was first implemented in FY2017, in which employees participate in a higher deductible ($1,500) PPO program, at lower premiums, but retain the low deductible ($500) benefit.

Other fringe benefits of $27,800 are budgeted to decrease $700. This account includes provisions to reimburse employees for additional deductible expenses incurred under the HRA program ($4,200), the health savings account (HSA) program ($12,000), the tuition reimbursement program ($10,000), and various administrative fees. The tuition reimbursement program, which has been historically underutilized, was decreased from $15,000 in FY2025 to $10,000 based on actual staff usage. The amount for this reimbursement program had been increased from $5,000 to $15,000 in FY2025 and it remained unused.

The FY2026 budget of $45,000 for temporary help, all of which is budgeted for the delivery department, increased $11,000 from the FY2025 budget. Actual expenditures incurred during FY2025 for position vacancies and staff leave coverage have been well in excess of budget. Recruiting expenditures of $14,500 are budgeted to increase $2,500 from the FY2025 budget primarily due to the implementation of background checks for all new hires and physical exams for new hires who will hold positions with physical requirements.

Collectively, FY2026 General Fund personnel expenditures are budgeted to increase $302,666, or 4.00% from the FY2025 budget. This increase is due primarily to budgeted 4% increases for COLA as well as the additions of nine delivery staff at Bolingbrook and anticipated increases in health, dental and vision costs, partially offset by the transition of ten staff to RSA as of January 1, 2026.

Library Materials
Library materials expenditures ($3,403,975) are budgeted to decrease $328,600, or 8.80% from the FY2025 budget. Group purchase E-resources expenditures of $2,806,750 are budgeted, compared to $3,212,500 budgeted for FY2025. These expenditures are offset by reimbursement revenues and will have no impact on fund balances. In addition, the budget provides that RAILS will use the proceeds of its eRead Illinois membership fees ($488,000), $3,000 above the FY2025 budget, to purchase e-books for the eRead Illinois shared collection. Additional content purchases for eRead Illinois are budgeted at $100,000 to provide additional content for materials that see higher usage rates. Finally, the budget provides for the

group purchase ($7,000) of the Public Web Browser for member libraries. A subscription for the RDS Toolkit ($925) is used by a RAILS staff member to provide cataloging training to member library staff. The additional content and Public Web Browser purchases will be provided at no cost to the membership.

Buildings and Grounds
Total buildings and grounds expenditures of $695,637 are budgeted to increase $90,265, or 14.91% from the FY2025 budget due primarily to an increase in rent expenditures for the lease of additional space at our Bolingbrook facility to house the expanded sorting operation. This also includes the increase when the current Bolingbrook lease was renewed beginning June 2025 as well as modest increases built into the existing leases for the East Peoria and Rockford facilities.

Custodial/janitorial services and supplies increased $9,559 primarily due to increases in contracted cleaning contracts for increased needs at Bolingbrook as well as increases in labor costs for our vendors.

Utilities are budgeted to increase $7,824 due primarily to an increase in the Utility Distribution Company (UDC) charges that are determined by the state. We are anticipating a slightly harsher winter and increased utilities costs for the increased space needs at Bolingbrook. RAILS signed a three-year fixed rate energy agreement with the Northern Illinois Municipal Electric Collaborative (NIMEC), locking in an increase that is approximately half of the market rate increases that were expected when the agreement was signed. This agreement ends May 2026.

Property insurance increased $4,405 primarily due to an expected 7% increase in rates due to nationwide casualty losses and larger than anticipated increases for CY2025.

Vehicle Expenditures
Total vehicle expenditures of $563,903 are budgeted to decrease $178,614, or 24.06% from the FY2025 budget, primarily from decreases in fuel ($124,683), other vehicle expenditures ($33,200), and vehicle repairs and maintenance ($31,700), partially offset by increased insurance ($10,969).

The FY2026 budget assumes decreased fuel usage overall of 5,000 gallons and a market price of $3.14 per gallon. Due to acquiring newer vehicles with better fuel economy, the fuel usage estimate was able to be lowered from the FY2025 estimate of 92,000 gallons to 87,000 gallons. The average fuel price over the past twelve months has been $3.14 with the most recent months hovering at $3.00 per gallon (tax-exempt). The US Energy Information Administration projects that fuel prices will drop $.18 per gallon in CY2026, which would be well under $3.00 per gallon for the Midwest.

Other vehicle expenditures ($8,000) are expected to decrease ($33,200) due to the completion of the vehicle rebranding project in FY2025 and minimal expenditures related to branding new vehicles in FY2026.

Vehicle repairs and maintenance are anticipated to decrease in FY2026 due to the replacement of over half of RAILS delivery fleet over the past two fiscal years. Prior to FY2024, RAILS had not purchased vehicles since FY2020.

The FY2026 vehicle insurance expenditures ($191,536) are budgeted to increase $10,969 due to an anticipated 7% premium increase.

Travel, Meetings and Continuing Education
Total expenditures of $391,152 for this category are budgeted to increase $55,037, or 16.37%.

The FY2026 continuing education budget of $133,800 is budgeted to increase $45,800 from the FY2025 budget. These funds are used to provide continuing education (CE) and consulting on the topics of library advocacy; general resource sharing issues; interlibrary loan (ILL) and the ILLINET Interlibrary Loan Code; reciprocal access; reciprocal borrowing; nonresident services; per capita grant requirements and standards; strategic planning; etc. The program primarily relies on outside, paid trainers and consulting sources to satisfy these needs. Costs include speaker fees and travel, facility, hospitality, and other associated costs. This line includes $41,800 for Niche Academy, a learning platform that RAILS plans to implement for continuing education services for our member libraries with potential future uses for RAILS staff. This line also includes a $15,000 provision for a leadership cohort for members as well as a small provision ($500) for assistance to member libraries for attendance at Directors University. The budget provides for continuing education in the following categories:

- General — $51,500 — Continued offerings of workshops, webinars, HR Source, and other events
- Niche Academy learning platform — $41,800 — Learning platform for RAILS members
- CE event grants — $16,000 — Continued support of RAILS libraries, networking groups, and consortia seeking to organize a CE event that is made available to RAILS members
- Leadership cohort – $15,000 – Leadership cohort for members
- Freedom Lifted subscription — $9,000 — Social justice and leadership training subscriptions taught with an EDI perspective that are available to RAILS members
- Directors University scholarships – $500 – Assistance for member libraries with demonstrated need to cover their registration fees to attend Directors University

Registrations and meetings ($112,665) expenditures are budgeted to increase $8,193 from the FY2025 budget. These expenditures primarily include registration fees and sponsorships, if applicable, for all conferences and courses as well as various board meeting and hospitality expenditures. We increased these expenditures from the prior year budget as we are planning to attend additional in-state conferences and trainings. We also included a small amount for celebration of staff milestone events, including retirements for staff at all of our service centers.

In-state and out-of-state travel expenditures increased $6,698 and decreased $5,654, respectively from the FY2025 budget. FY2026 budgeted in-state travel expenditures increased due to anticipated increased travel to member libraries and attendance at more in-state conferences and events. FY2026 budgeted out-of-state travel expenditures decreased due to decreased attendance at the American Library Association (ALA) conference partially offset by the addition of the Public Library Association (PLA) conference which is held biennially.

Public Relations
Public Relations expenditures of $28,900 are budgeted to increase $900 from the FY2025 budget due primarily to anticipated increased costs related to conference booths. This expenditure line also includes $10,000 for RAILS branded conference promotional materials, $10,000 for eRead Illinois branded promotional materials, $5,000 for the Remo platform for the Illinois School Library Workers Symposium, $3,500 for booth costs, and $400 for data collection postcards. RAILS is applying for a grant to cover the costs of the Remo platform, but we are unsure if it will be awarded.

Liability Insurance
Liability insurance expenditures of $55,984 are budgeted to decrease $3,583 from the FY2025 budget, primarily from a less than anticipated budgeted FY2025 increase. This decrease is partially offset by an anticipated 7% increase in calendar year 2026 rates due to nationwide loss exposure from employment claims, cyber liability claims, and claims for digital accessibility.

Supplies, Postage and Printing
Total expenditures of $337,274 for this category are budgeted to increase $92,482 from the FY2025 budget, primarily from an $89,059 increase in computers, software and supplies. The increase in computers, software, and supplies expenditures is primarily due to a provision for the replacement of staff computers early in FY2026 ($100,000), cloud hosting for RAILS websites ($25,000), and the purchase of a subscription for an artificial intelligence (AI) platform for staff use ($7,200). These provisions are partially offset by the completion of the switch replacements and headset replacements in FY2025 as well as a less than anticipated FY2025 increase in Microsoft Office 365 subscription costs.

The FY2026 budget includes $15,000 for replacement furniture purchases for Burr Ridge based on a continued assessment of staff needs. To provide more information to RAILS visitors when they enter the Burr Ridge facility, RAILS plans to add a digital entryway sign ($5,000). Additional expenditures include a provision of $5,000 for updated resource sharing map printing, $2,000 for RAILS branded tee shirts for new hires and staff, and $500 for promotional items for the shared booth with AISLE, IHLS, and ILA at the Illinois Association of School Boards conference.

Delivery supplies expenditures of $52,700 increased $2,200 due primarily to anticipated routine small equipment purchases (hand dollies, carts, etc.) as needs arise.

Telephone and Telecommunications
FY2026 budgeted expenditures of $77,705, which incorporate new telecommunications contracts signed as a result of the negotiation work of staff and our e-Rate consultant, are budgeted to decrease $22,741 from the FY2025 budget. This is primarily due to cost savings from restructuring our services with almost all of our internet service providers as well as the reevaluation of the number of hotspots that staff require for travel.

Equipment Rental, Repair & Maintenance
Total expenditures of $129,499 for this category are budgeted to decrease $13,646 from the FY2025 budget, primarily due to decreased equipment repair and maintenance agreements. The budget includes existing contracts for HVAC maintenance, generator maintenance, copier equipment, and annual maintenance expenditures on various equipment and software, including Zoom. This decrease is primarily due to an anticipated decrease in Zoom and Veeam backup expenditures.

Professional Services
Total expenditures of $272,064 for this category are budgeted to decrease $59,362 from the FY2025 budget, primarily from a $43,075 decrease in consulting expenditures. This was primarily due to moving the world language cataloging program expenditures for third-party cataloging services for items that cannot be translated and cataloged in-house ($52,000) from the General Fund to the Special Revenue Fund. Consulting expenditures include a provision for strategic planning ($35,000), advanced transcription work and live human captioning services for increased accessibility ($15,000), consulting for an AI Ambassador program for system staff ($10,000), efficiency and best practices consulting for the increased sorting operation at Bolingbrook ($10,000), and a redesign of the Find More Illinois logo ($6,000). These

RAILS FY2026 System Area and Per Capita Grant Application |June 20, 2025

additions were more than offset by the FY2025 completion of several planned projects around accessibility and sustainability.

FY2026 budgeted consulting expenditures of $157,200 consist of:

- HR Source discounted membership program - $56,700
- Strategic planning - $35,000
- FOIA/OMA hotline - $12,000
- Advanced transcription services - $10,000
- Consulting for AI Ambassador program - $10,000
- Find More Illinois project consulting - $10,000
- Efficiency and best practices consulting for increased sorting operation at Bolingbrook - $10,000
- Find More Illinois logo redesign - $6,000
- Live human captioning services - $5,000
- e-Rate Consulting - $2,500

We are continuing to develop contracts with consultants in a variety of areas for which libraries and RAILS have needs. These needs and priorities change from year to year, as will the amounts that we have budgeted. We have not hired permanent staff to provide consulting services, as that service model limits our ability to respond to changing financial conditions and the needs of members. The HR Source membership program is partially reimbursed by fees that are billed on a sliding scale to participating libraries.

Legal fees of $50,000 are budgeted to decrease $17,600 due to the current progress of the Policy Committee's review of all current policies as well as an anticipated simpler union negotiation process for the small portion of our covered staff. These costs are budgeted based on a portion of actual costs over the last negotiation period.

Contractual Services
Total expenditures of $3,068,697 for this category are budgeted to decrease $422,614 from the FY2025 budget, due primarily due to a decrease in other contractual services ($500,865), partially offset by an increase in contractual agreements with systems, member libraries and other cooperatives ($62,183) as well as an increase in information service costs ($16,068).

Other contractual services expenditures of $1,302,782 are expected to decrease $500,865 primarily due to a $395,565 decrease in the budgeted delivery services contract with CTL. To enhance sorting accuracy and put us in a better position to control future price increases, RAILS renegotiated the contract with CTL to eliminate sorting services and add them to our current operation at Bolingbrook. This decrease in expenditures is also due to anticipated fuel price decreases from $4.25 per gallon to $3.14 per gallon which eliminates the expectation of a 6% fuel surcharge. Additional decreases are due to moving the grant-funded expenditures for the maintenance and development of L2 from the General Fund to the Special Revenue Fund as well as the elimination of the $15,000 provision to support the FY2025 start of the JSTOR group purchase for members.

The FY2026 other contractual services budget provides for administration expenditures of $390,500, a decrease of $105,300 from the FY2025 budget. These expenditures include:

- Find More Illinois expenditures of $170,500
- BiblioLabs platform expenditures of $70,000 to support the statewide BiblioLabs platform for Inkie.org which promotes local self-published author materials
- Explore More Illinois platform expenditures of $60,000 to expand the program, which connects library patrons to deals and discounts from museums and other cultural attractions
- A provision of $35,000 to continue and further develop Consortia Manager. Consortia Manager provides an infrastructure for managing member library group purchases and discounts as well as create the opportunity for the expansion of group purchase programs and process efficiencies
- A provision of $25,000, which is RAILS' investment to continue and encourage participation in the Smart Horizons Career Online High School group purchase offer
- A provision of $25,000, which is RAILS' investment to encourage adoption of the Gale Excel high school group purchase offer
- A provision of $4,000 for the Backstage Library Works bibliographic MARC records processing for eRead Illinois
- A provision of $1,000 for potential records shredding in compliance with our Illinois State approved records retention plan

The FY2026 budget for agreements with systems, member libraries, and other cooperatives expenditures ($1,723,849) is $62,183 above the FY2025 budget primarily due to an increase in LLSAP support ($246,029) partially offset by a decrease in administration expenditures ($183,846). LLSAP direct support expenditures increased $246,029 from the FY2025 budget, as RSA will only be receiving six months of in-kind personnel support for the ten staff members who will transition to being employed by RSA as of January 1, 2026. RAILS intends to continue its support payments to six entities in FY2026, three of which (CCS, Rock River, and Pinnacle) were added in FY2020. The FY2026 and FY2025 support payments are shown below:

	FY 2026	FY 2025
CCS	$ 223,995	$ 215,295
Pinnacle	56,527	57,803
PrairieCat	527,062	515,237
RRLC	71,504	70,215
RSA	224,713	0
SWAN	501,394	500,616
Total Direct LLSAP Support	$ 1,605,195	$ 1,359,166

The FY2026 total support allocations to PrairieCat and RSA, both of which receive varying levels of in-kind support from RAILS in addition to the monetary awards above, are $580,140 and $816,441, respectively.

This increase in LLSAP support expenditures is partially offset by a decrease in administration ($183,846) primarily due to the transfer of indirect costs recorded in the General Fund for the three grants included in the Special Revenue Fund ($192,346). These costs include RAILS staff member time, travel, and other overhead costs. This is partially offset by an increase in the need for cataloging membership grants from $140,000 in FY2025 to $150,000 in FY2026. These grants are budgeted based on expressed interest and anticipated need.

This overall decrease in contractual services is also further offset by the increase in information services costs ($16,068) primarily due to additional costs to move more of our information technology infrastructure to the cloud and increased costs for subscriptions to increase the accessibility of our websites and meetings.

Professional Association Membership Dues
Total expenditures of $12,339 for this category are budgeted to increase $1,090 from the FY2025 budget, due primarily to changing needs for memberships and achieving savings from shifting individual membership to organization memberships for select library groups.

Miscellaneous
Total expenditures of $14,950 for this category are budgeted to increase $2,500 from the FY2025 budget. This increase is due to increased anticipated bank fees due to shifting a portion of our vendors to ACH payments over the course of FY2026. This will reduce the need to purchase check stock moving forward. This account is used for bank, credit card fees, and other minor expenses.

Special Revenue Fund Grant Expenditures

Expenditures of $1,099,693 are budgeted for FY2026 and are anticipated to be completely offset by grant revenues.

RAILS was awarded $850,000 from the Cook County Digital Equity Fund to establish a digital navigator network in libraries within suburban Cook County. The bulk of these funds will be distributed to libraries in the form of sub-grants for this digital equity and digital access work ($632,500). RAILS plans to work with two outside consultants for planning and outreach ($90,000), and the remaining amount of the grant ($127,500) will be used to cover RAILS staff time spent administering, developing, and managing the project including expected staff travel and other indirect costs for administering the grant.

FY2026 is the fifth year of both the world language cataloging services and the continuing maintenance and development of L2 grants. As in prior years, RAILS has applied for funding to support both services, and we anticipate receiving a funding decision shortly after the start of FY2026.

Total expenditures for the world language cataloging services program ($123,834) include a portion of the Cataloging Services Manager's time spent on the project ($32,730) as well as a temporary part-time Cataloging Services Assistant position ($27,647). Additional expenditures for this grant include cataloging fees for the third-party cataloging service that catalogs items that cannot be translated in-house ($52,000), a small allowance for shipping supplies and other materials ($200), and indirect costs for administering the program ($11,257).

Total expenditures for the continuing maintenance and development of L2 ($125,859) include a portion of the Applications and Web Developer's time spent on the project ($9,418). Additional expenditures include maintenance and development to be provided by the vendor that built L2 ($105,000) and indirect costs for administering the project ($11,441).

Capital Outlays

Expenditures of $699,000 are budgeted $49,000 below the FY2025 budget. The budget includes $35,000 to purchase servers for migration away from VMware. This project was originally budgeted to happen in

FY2025, but it involved more extensive research and lead times than anticipated and is now expected to be completed and paid for early in FY2026.

RAILS had a building assessment performed for the Burr Ridge facility that highlighted several areas of long-deferred maintenance that have been incorporated into the FY2026 budget, including:

- Chiller replacement at a cost of $285,000
- Light fixture and ceiling tile replacement at a cost of $90,000
- Asphalt repairs at a cost of $60,000
- Server room reconfiguration at a cost of $10,000

In addition to these items for Burr Ridge, a total of $10,000 is included to install or finish installing key fob systems in both the Rockford and Coal Valley facilities to improve uniformity and security. A provision of $12,000 is also included to replace the well-worn carpet in the East Peoria facility.

The FY2026 budget also includes $87,000 for the purchase of two passenger vehicles for Burr Ridge including a larger vehicle that can be used to transport items for conferences or projects at other RAILS service centers. An additional two replacement vehicles are budgeted for delivery at a total cost of $110,000. With these planned purchases, we are continuing to move towards a regular schedule for the replacement of our fleet.

Conclusion

General Fund revenues of $17,029,155 are budgeted to decrease $840,208 from the FY2025 budget, primarily due to decreases in reimbursements ($405,750), fees for services and materials ($328,752), and investment income ($123,000).

Budgeted General Fund expenditures of $16,916,043 are $484,220 below the FY2025 budgeted amounts. Higher than prior year's expenditures are budgeted in personnel; supplies, postage and printing; buildings and grounds; and travel and continuing education. Budgeted expenditures decreased overall in nearly all other categories, with the largest decreases in contractual services, library materials, vehicle expenses, and professional services.

For the General Fund, we are budgeting total estimated revenues exceeding estimated expenditures by $113,112. We are also budgeting $699,000 of expenditures from the Capital Projects Fund, which has no budgeted revenues.

The budget and operational plan are based on level APC funding of $11,871,714. We requested additional funding ($125,859) to support the continued maintenance and development of L2, and additional funding ($123,834) to support the world language cataloging services. RAILS was awarded a grant from the Cook County Digital Equity Fund in the amount of $850,000. These three grants are budgeted in the Special Revenue Fund. The budget we are presenting includes the services that RAILS believes we should be providing for our members.

This is both a forward-looking and financially sound budget that will enable RAILS to work toward meeting the goals in its strategic plan and the activities identified by the Illinois State Library with enough flexibility to allow for additional activity growth and cost increases for the future.

RAILS FY 2026 System Area and Per Capita Grant Application

3.0 System Operational Plan

This document presents the Reaching Across Illinois Library System's (RAILS) operational plan for FY 2026. This operational plan offers a strategic and sustainable approach to empowering our libraries to better serve their communities.

You will find that the FY 2026 System Operational Plan has a wide range of activities. At RAILS, we continue to offer the same high-level services that our members have come to expect, including interlibrary delivery, continuing education and consulting resources to library employees and trustees, shared catalog and cataloging support, e-content services, museum and attractions pass program, group purchases and vendor discounts, networking opportunities for library employees, and targeted grant funding to member libraries and much more.

But we are also aware that our libraries need more than just the tangible things that we can offer them. They also need partners who are willing to listen and engage with them about their challenges. By being willing to talk directly to our members via activities like our conference participation, site visits, and online events, RAILS gains valuable insights into what the future holds for our libraries.

The key is resource sharing. When libraries can work together to offer more, the biggest beneficiaries are the people we serve. Alongside the continuing support that we receive from our statewide partners, we look forward to another great year for Illinois libraries.

Strategic Plan Goal One: *RAILS provides leadership in ensuring sustainable, equitable resource sharing for all member libraries.*

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
Enhance the sharing of knowledge and best practices through member networking and communications between all types of libraries	Plan/schedule virtual and in-person networking opportunities for staff at all levels at all sizes and types of libraries (academic, public, school, and specialized) to share best practices on a variety of topics. Work with statewide partners, including the Association of Illinois School Library Educators (AISLE), Illinois Association of College & Research Libraries (IACRL), Illinois Heartland Library System (IHLS), Illinois Library Association (ILA), and others to plan networking opportunities for staff at different levels from different types of libraries and for public library trustees. Publicize existing RAILS networking groups and the benefits of belonging to a networking group to all levels of staff at all types and sizes of libraries.	

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
	Assist in the formation of new RAILS networking groups as needed. Continue to build and strengthen relationships and engagement with RAILS networking groups. Attend networking group meetings as appropriate to share the latest RAILS news and gather feedback on RAILS programs/services. Continue with plans to offer member groups the opportunity to meet in person at RAILS service centers as possible. Continue providing subsidized Zoom and conference calling accounts to qualified RAILS networking groups. Encourage use of RAILS mailing lists, including lists geared toward different library types and sizes, and staff at all levels. Establish new mailing lists as needed. Sunset lists that aren't being used.	
Leverage economies of scale to provide greater purchasing power for member libraries so they can offer more resources to their users than libraries would be able to afford on their own	Continue to expand the RAILS discount and group purchase program by offering new deals for member libraries of all sizes and types. Target publicity to help ensure that members know about specific offers available to their library type. Gather input from members at all types and sizes of libraries on desired discounts/group purchases. Implement new offerings in response to this feedback. Work with statewide partners – including those at the Secretary of State's Office/Illinois State Library - to promote availability of the statewide database package. Along with internal and external partners consider new avenues for outreach and engagement around this resource, for all library types. Continue the development of the comprehensive Consortia Manager platform to manage RAILS group purchases and discounts.	

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
	Develop standards and evaluation metrics to gauge the effectiveness of the deals & discounts program. Widely publicize member savings to demonstrate the program's impact. Continue with new *Chicago Tribune* Digital Access pilot program. Analyze the results to determine whether it is appropriate to expand to a larger audience. Develop new methods for promoting deals & discounts. Network with group purchasing managers in Illinois and nationwide to explore new opportunities and develop best practices. **Online High School Programs** Continue to subsidize the management of the Career Online High School (COHS) and Gale: Excel Adult High School platforms to enable libraries to offer adult learners accredited high school diplomas and career certificates. Explore additional ways to expand and promote the COHS and Gale: Excel Adult High School programs, including: • Targeting libraries not yet participating in the program with large populations of adults who have not received a high school diploma • Targeting youth services library staff to help them promote the program to young parents without a high school diploma	
RAILS will continue to seek greater efficiencies, innovations, and enhancements to delivery services.	Work with RAILS members of all sizes and types to determine the most appropriate delivery method to meet their needs. Purchase two new additional delivery vehicles to replace the aging fleet. Consult with members on delivery issues/concerns on an ongoing basis. Widely promote the use of the delivery help desk.	

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
	Conduct a delivery satisfaction survey during the upcoming year.	
	Promote the need for RAILS members to complete quarterly delivery volume counts. Consult with libraries individually as needed.	
	Continue discussions with RAILS Consortia Committee about finding new ways to utilize data to get an accurate count for delivery.	
	Develop strategies to improve and achieve total compliance with quarterly delivery counts to get more accurate information on delivery volume. Examine count data to determine potential changes to existing delivery routes and best practices.	
	Continue to utilize the updated delivery video series to help train staff from member libraries. Provide one-on-one assistance with libraries as necessary.	
	Continue expansion of the Bolingbrook facility to perform in-house sorting. Focus on fine tuning the operation for greater efficiency.	
	Continue providing high-quality statewide delivery services to CARLI (Consortium of Academic & Research Libraries in Illinois) members via ILDS (Illinois Library Delivery Service).	
	Continue working with GeoMARC (formerly Laboratory for Applied Spatial Analysis) on potential future improvements to RAILS delivery service, including delivery route efficiencies.	
Work collaboratively with members, the Illinois Heartland Library System, and the Illinois State Library to identify and support appropriate and affordable shared catalog solutions and expand	**General** Work with the RAILS Resource Sharing Committee to ensure sustainable, equitable resource sharing to help meet the first goal of the RAILS strategic plan. Promote/encourage the use of Find More Illinois statewide to help achieve this goal. Collaborate with the Illinois State Library (ISL), IHLS, Chicago Public Library System (CPLS), AISLE, CARLI,	

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
resource sharing to all libraries and residents	IACRL, ILA, and other stakeholders to expand resource sharing in Illinois Collaborate with and support the work of the International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC) **Promote/Support LLSAP Membership** Continue to support six LLSAPs (CCS, Pinnacle, PrairieCat, Rock River Library Consortium, RSA, and SWAN) financially via the LLSAP Support Grant, as well as offering the use of RAILS meeting spaces and other services. Continue to support RSA's efforts toward operational independence from RAILS with a target date of January 1, 2026 to fully transition staff. Continue to offer the Catalog Membership Grant to fund one-time costs for libraries wishing to join an LLSAP, with ongoing evaluation and adjustment of the grant process framework to maximize support to nonautomated libraries. Continue progress on RAILCAR, a data collection and analysis initiative designed to supplement existing data related to LLSAPs and library automation. This tool is integrated into the processes for both the LLSAP Support and Catalog Membership Grants. Promote the value of consortium membership to all types and sizes of RAILS libraries via RAILS communication tools, committee work, and member encounters. Continue to work with RAILS Consortia Committee to investigate and recommend ways to improve and increase consortial services in Illinois. **Expand and Promote Find More Illinois (FMI)** Recruit libraries to join FMI	

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
	• Target promotions at libraries that would grow and enhance resources available through FMI • Promote FMI benefits to nonautomated libraries Target academic libraries to join the program. Continue working on a lender-only program for academic libraries that would allow them to join at a reduced rate. This will expand the collection. This program may also be expanded to other library types based upon further analysis and consideration. Continue to promote the growth of FMI, including developing new recruitment strategies and collaborating with CARLI to add I-Share members who wish to participate. Enhance the FMI program with add-on services as appropriate. Implement operational efficiencies as the program grows. Provide training, consulting, and technical support to FMI libraries. Evaluate and revise the FMI participation fee structure to ensure ongoing value to members of all types and sizes. Establish an FMI user group and/or committee working group to incorporate member feedback into the fee structure, as well as to assist with providing insights into recruitment, program enhancements, and best practices for participants. Continue to offer IHLS the opportunity to participate in FMI. **Support High-Quality Cataloging** Continue to develop and deliver cataloging training in response to member feedback, including recurring opportunities and one-time workshops. Continue to adapt course materials and provide	

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
	them to members for self-guided use and maximize the Moodle platform for recurring courses. Continue support and consulting in cataloging-related activities for eRead Illinois and Find More Illinois. Ensure collaboration and administration of the iCAMP mentorship program, participating in the evaluation and operationalization of the program activities. Work with IHLS to achieve the program's goals and ensure alignment with RAILS priorities. Support and contribute to the work of the South Asia Funnel as part of the Subject Authority Cooperative Program (SACO). Oversee the administration, growth, and cataloging activities of the World Language Cataloging Program and its grant funding. Develop the FY2026 plan, marketing plan, and funding request, with contingencies for the Cataloging Services Assistant role. **eRead Illinois Boundless** Recruit RAILS libraries and IHLS non-SHARE libraries to join eRead Illinois. Support the training and marketing needs of eRead Illinois participants. Evaluate eRead content to ensure that it continues to meet member needs (see also EDI section below) • Continue to enhance and develop additional content for K-12 students • Regularly seek input from eRead participants on the collection and implement member suggestions as possible Network with e-content managers in Illinois and nationwide to share and stay abreast of new developments and initiatives. **Inkie.org Library**	

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
	Continue to develop and promote the Inkie.org Library program to support self-publishing, Illinois authors, and Illinois e-content statewide.

Continue offering group purchase pricing on BiblioBoard products for self-published authors.

Publicize Inkie.org Library resources as being free (courtesy of RAILS) to all Illinois libraries and to all Illinois residents, including those not served by a public library.

Provide current information on available resources for IHLS to share with their member libraries.

Explore More Illinois (EMI)

Continue working with CPLS and IHLS to ensure that the new logos and branding guidelines are followed.

Collaborate with CPLS and IHLS to publicize EMI to all Illinois public libraries and community colleges and to encourage them to participate.

Continue to grow/expand the number and types of participating attractions. Collaborate with CPLS and IHLS to recruit attractions.

Network with ePass (EMI's software) administrators nationwide to explore new opportunities and solutions and to share best practices.

Other E-Resources Initiatives

Continue to develop RAILS Vendor Privacy Policies and VPAT (Vendor Product Accessibility Template) web pages with links to policies and VPATs for third-party vendors providing e-resources to public libraries. Based on member feedback and participation, determine whether to expand the project to include academic, school, and specialized libraries.

Continue to stay abreast of e-content initiatives, such as the Palace Project, Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) and Illinois Digital Heritage Hub. | |

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
	Partner with other library organizations to continue dialogue with publishers on need for better e-book access/pricing for libraries/consortia.	

Strategic Plan Goal Two: *RAILS models best practices in equity, diversity, accessibility, and inclusion.*

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
RAILS will provide leadership in developing and providing resources that will support member libraries' efforts to provide equitable, diverse, and inclusive services.	Continue offering regular EDI training opportunities for all RAILS members. Collaborate with other Illinois stakeholders offering EDI-related continuing education (CE) to avoid duplication of effort. Continue offering World Language Cataloging Services grant program statewide. • Continue seeking grant funds from ISL to fund the statewide program • Continue publicizing the program to libraries of all types statewide • Continue to promote the benefits of IHLS' Cataloging Maintenance Center program and how that program differs from and works in conjunction with the RAILS program Continue to develop/promote an eRead Illinois collection and Inkie.org Library resources that address the needs of an ethnically and culturally diverse audience. Regularly evaluate the collection using industry respected tools to identify potential gaps. Recruit attractions for Explore More Illinois of interest to an ethnically and culturally diverse audience.	

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
	Promote the online high school programs (see above) as addressing the needs of a culturally, economically, and ethnically diverse audience. Offer RAILS Member Updates featuring topics and ideas that connect to RAILS EDI efforts. Provide/promote opportunities for members from all types and sizes of libraries to share best practices and collaborate on EDI-related challenges through the RAILS EDI mailing list, EDI Pulse Page, and other activities. Promote and provide administrative support as applicable for RAILS EDI-related networking groups. Continue to offer the Social Justice for Libraries Course from Freedom Lifted for member libraries. Include EDI elements in RAILS grants for members (CE Event grants, My Library Is… grants, etc.) when possible, to encourage applicants to provide equitable, diverse, inclusive, and accessible programs/services and to publicize these offerings to their communities. Under the leadership of the RAILS Digital Accessibility team, develop best practices to ensure that RAILS digital content will adhere to the World Wide Web Consortium's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines v2.1 at Level AA. Continue to incorporate the new Climate Team video as part of the onboarding process for all new RAILS staff to help familiarize them with our organizational culture and values	
Examine all aspects of RAILS policies, procedures, and core services through an equity lens and make needed improvements	Continue to grow and develop RAILS' external and internal EDI strategies and initiatives Continue conducting a thorough analysis/evaluation of RAILS Employee Handbook to ensure that all language and policies meet our EDI goals Continue the work of the RAILS Climate Team to identify and implement internal best practices and initiatives for RAILS staff	

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
	Develop internal documentation in conjunction with new ethical AI policy Continue holding regular EDI training sessions for RAILS staff	
Work with RAILS members of all types to identify and implement ways to diversify library governing bodies and staff to increase representation and better reflect the communities they serve	Continue to work with the RAILS Board Nominating Committee and others to attract diverse candidates to run for the RAILS Board. Promote RAILS' goal to develop a more diverse board in election publicity. Provide training/consulting/guidance for member libraries of all types to help them develop a more diverse and representative board. Provide opportunities for libraries of all types to share best practices and strategies they have used to diversify their governing boards, including via the RAILS EDI Pulse Page and mailing list. Provide training for RAILS members to help them diversify their hiring and recruitment practices. Provide opportunities/tools for members to share strategies they have used to recruit a more diverse staff, including the EDI mailing list and the EDI Pulse Page.	

Strategic Plan Goal Three: *RAILS assists member libraries in preparing for the future.*

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
Leveraging RAILS' power and influence in the Illinois library community, work collaboratively for additional funding for all types of libraries to ensure that libraries have the staffing, technology, and infrastructure needed to offer essential and cutting-	Provide CE/consulting/tools to help libraries with different aspects of fundraising, including how to advocate for additional/continued funding from library administrators, funders, etc. Continue to schedule regular meetings with AISLE, Chicago Public Schools (CPS), IHLS, ILA, and ISL to discuss collaborative projects to help school libraries deal with funding challenges,	

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
edge services to their communities	understand legal/policy changes, and create new resources to help address issues. Participate in a wide variety of efforts to help advocate for continued/increased funding for all types of libraries, including: • ILA Legislative Meetups • Responding to American Library Association (ALA) calls to actions • Continuing to work with the ILA Public Policy Committee to discuss legislation of importance to libraries Keep RAILS libraries informed of important legislative developments affecting libraries. Publicize opportunities for staff from member libraries to advocate for continued/increased funding for libraries as appropriate, including: • Encouraging members to attend ILA Legislative Meetups • Encouraging members to respond to ALA calls to action • Encouraging library staff to use talking points and other resources on the My Library Is… website • Encouraging members to contact their elected officials as appropriate and providing talking points on specific issues and programs as possible Utilize the new Numbers that Count campaign and the Illinois Libraries: Agencies of Impact report to promote the value of libraries and continued support of the library ecosystem in Illinois. Support AISLE's statewide efforts to increase the number of certified school librarians. Work with the RAILS Board Advocacy Committee to educate the board about issues affecting RAILS and libraries that may require their advocacy efforts locally, regionally, or nationally.	

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
Help member libraries of all types and sizes demonstrate their value to their different stakeholders	**My Library Is… (MLI) Initiative** Continue to promote My Library Is… website resources via the *RAILS E-News* and other publicity channels. Continue to encourage staff at all levels from all types and sizes of libraries to contribute posts to the My Library Is… blog to share best practices in telling the library story. Continue offering MLI grants to help libraries with limited resources to tell their stories more effectively. Examine talking points available on MLI website and revise/expand them as necessary to make sure they help staff at all sizes and types of libraries to demonstrate their value to different stakeholders. Continue to work with IHLS to further expand and publicize the initiative to staff at all types and sizes of libraries statewide. Continue to work with AISLE, IACRL, ILA, and other stakeholders on common goals/ activities re to the MLI initiative to avoid duplication of efforts. Engage with marketing/communications staff from member libraries to ensure that they have access to My Library Is… materials and know about the campaign.	
Professional development and member engagement efforts are future-focused, crossing library types and specific to individual library type needs	Provide CE/consulting on general resource sharing issues identified in the administrative rules, including interlibrary loan, the ILLINET Interlibrary Loan Code, nonresident services, the RAILS Resource Sharing Policy, etc. Provide CE/consulting on library advocacy, management and practice, and other core service areas identified in the administrative rules.	

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
	Provide CE/consulting to help libraries meet per capita grant requirements and standards for their type of library.	
	Offer CE/consulting assistance and other resources to help libraries of all types and sizes to develop/maintain a current strategic plan.	
	Identify/monitor issues, trends, and challenges affecting libraries of all types and sizes and provide CE/consulting to help libraries respond to these issues and challenges.	
	Offer new opportunities for member learning, such as Learning Labs, which are participatory and interactive sessions for staff.	
	Continue to gather member input on CE needs from all sizes and types of RAILS libraries and implement training to meet those needs.	
	Based on member input, continue to offer CE Event Grants to help libraries, networking groups, and library consortia plan/offer training events of interest to library staff. Continue prioritizing EDI-related topics for the grants as referenced above.	
	Continue to partner with AISLE to identify training needs for school library staff and to offer joint CE opportunities based on that feedback	
	Continue offering sessions with PDH credits.	
	Continue offering Directors University in-person event as well as DU On Demand recordings, which allow all directors to access essential information year-round.	
	Work with statewide stakeholders to plan and offer Directors 2.0 to offer intermediate-level training for library directors. Publicize widely.	
	With the help of the Library Leadership Training Design team, offer a new professional	

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
	development cohort that will help expand leadership training in Illinois.	
	Continue partnership with United for Libraries to provide statewide, online, on-demand trustee training. Publicize training widely.	
	Continue to support the iLEAD Trustee Learning Portal.	
	Consult with/attend library board meetings as appropriate to help boards meet legal requirements and to develop leadership skills.	
	Continue partnership with HR Source to provide CE and discounted membership. Publicize widely.	
	Continue partnership with Ancel Glink to offer statewide FOIA/OMA hotline. Publicize widely.	

Strategic Plan Goal Four: *RAILS leads alongside member libraries to develop and strengthen the Illinois library community and expand services to all.*

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
RAILS will continue to strengthen collaborative relationships with partner library organizations, including the Association of Illinois School Library Educators, the Chicago Public Library, the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois, the Illinois Association of College & Research Libraries, the Illinois Heartland Library System, the Illinois Library Association, the Illinois State Library, and the Special Libraries	**Service Standards** Continue conversations with ISL, IHLS, and other partners to explore possibility of revising system membership standards to help libraries of all types provide better service to their communities **L2 (Library Directory and Learning Calendar)** Ask ISL to continue to provide additional grant funding to support L2 Continue to provide statewide leadership for L2 • Host, maintain, and develop additional features • Provide ongoing user help and support to library staff, networking groups, and sponsor organizations (LLSAPs, ISL, library systems)	

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
Association – Illinois Community.	• Update and maintain externally sourced directory data and ensure adherence to formatting standards • Provide technical support, ongoing reporting, and any necessary development for annual library certification • Facilitate the statewide advisory group (L2G2) and participation in the Intercept open source community Continue to contract with Aten Design Group for L2 support and development. Continue to create, maintain, and update technical and procedural documentation and how-to materials for all types of users in various formats. Promote and provide guidance to library administrators on updating their resource sharing policies, non-resident program participation, and other self-reported directory information. **Certification** Work with ISL, IHLS, and other partners to improve and enhance the annual certification process. Work with RAILS members to ensure that they complete the certification process. **Other Collaborative Initiatives** RAILS Executive Director continues to serve on Illinois State Library Advisory Committee. Continue to schedule regular meetings with AISLE, CPS, IHLS, ILA, ISL, and others as appropriate to discuss collaborative projects to benefit school libraries as referenced above. Collaborate with AISLE, IHLS, ILA, and ISL to plan Illinois School Library Workers Symposium, supporting individuals working in school libraries with no formal library education. Collaborate with AISLE, IHLS, CARLI, ILA, and others to form volunteer regional response teams to help libraries facing materials challenges	

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
	Continue providing leadership and support to special libraries. Including helping to determine next steps after the dissolution of the Special Libraries Association (SLA).	
	Continue regular meetings with the Commissioner of the Chicago Public Library to discuss collaboration possibilities	
	Broadband	
	Continue to engage in statewide efforts focused on broadband expansion, technology adoption, and digital equity issues, including continued leadership of the Illinois Department of Economic Opportunity's Broadband Advisory Council.	
	Continue to work with CARLI and IHLS to raise awareness among library staff, advocate for the importance of library services in expanding digital literacy and technology adoption, and cultivate additional partnership opportunities.	
	Partner on grant initiatives with library-related organizations to improve digital literacy in the state of Illinois.	
	Engage with and support member libraries in their own digital equity efforts through continued support for the Digital Equity Networking Group, promoting opportunities for funding and/or collaboration, and sharing resources to support robust digital literacy services.	
RAILS will continually seek to understand member perceptions of inequities in system services to better support academic, school, and specialized	Develop new targeted email communications for specific library types. Promote the member centers for different types of libraries on the redesigned RAILS website	

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
libraries, as well as public libraries of all sizes.	Mail promotional pieces to libraries not receiving RAILS delivery as appropriate to ensure they are aware of the programs/services available to them Continue to meet with AISLE, CPS, IHLS, ILA, and ISL to address the needs of school libraries as referenced above. Continue to work with other stakeholders statewide and beyond on school library data project (see next section). (See also Communications section below)	
Continuously evaluate RAILS programs and services to ensure that they are having an impact and are helping to create the best possible future for all member libraries	Continue to work with AISLE, CPS, IHLS, ILA, ISL, and other stakeholders statewide on the SLATE project including library staff, administrators, boards, and other about the importance of school libraries and the need to support and fund them. Continue to promote the SLATE data dashboard widely including via email, social media campaigns, conferences, and networking opportunities. Continue to improve and expand the SLATE data dashboard through the following: • Continue to collect school data through School Library Census program • Continued development of expanded features and functions • Identification and inclusion of additional tools and resources for school library advocacy Launch Libraries Count: A RAILS Conference in conjunction with the 2025 ILA Annual Conference in Rosemont, IL. This event will be an opportunity for libraries to learn how to use their data effectively. Research developing a centralized RAILS data hub to coordinate and manage data sources used to support services for RAILS members and staff • Determine core data sources used by RAILS staff and create documentation for requirements, maintenance, governance, and access	

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
	• Develop method for training staff on proper data usage and create data request ticket system Continue developing RAILCAR (as referenced above), which contains information from core data sources for LLSAPs and member libraries to inform their decisions on consortium membership and compare LLSAP operations. Update the RAILS resource sharing map in ArcGIS software to include new data layers and make it more accessible for members. Develop new data-related website and SharePoint site to improve data accessibility for staff, members, and other stakeholders. Develop a data ticketing system to help keep track of project requests. Investigate feasibility of supplementing the quarterly delivery counts with ILS data to reduce staff labor and improve accuracy. Continue to work with RAILS Communications on a member-facing, data-inclusive annual report that showcases the work of the system. Continue to solicit member feedback via RAILS communication tools, surveys, and member encounters. Implement changes/additions to RAILS programs/services based on member input as appropriate. Ensure that we are getting feedback from libraries of all types and sizes in all geographic areas of the system. Continue the Data Internship program to provide opportunities for library students to gain practical library data and systems experience through contributing to RAILS data projects.	

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
	(See other sections of this document for plans to gather and respond to member feedback on specific RAILS programs/services).	
Collaborate with the Illinois State Library, the Illinois Heartland Library System, and other partners to develop a plan and timeline for achieving universal service	Continue to work with the RAILS Board Universal Service Committee to find and implement solutions to challenges related to the unserved in Illinois. Continue to work with members to identify obstacles to libraries adopting the expanded Cards for Kids Act legislation. • Encourage all libraries to extend service to all children in unserved areas • Promote RAILS talking points designed to help library staff demonstrate the benefits of adopting this legislation to their boards and other stakeholders • Explore utilizing L2 to gather data on libraries participating in the expanded Cards for Kids legislation Continue to work with statewide partners to seek legislative support for statewide access to electronic resources for all Illinois residents, including the unserved (see further details above). Publicize requirement for library boards to vote annually on participation in the nonresident program and for members to update their participation information via L2. Publicize the names of participating/nonparticipating libraries and share with ISL per statutory requirements. Identity member libraries who have not updated their L2 non-resident info in over 18 months. Coordinate outreach to those libraries to receive updated information.	

Other Administrative Activities

The following section details RAILS' planned FY 2024 activities to meet statutory priorities for Illinois library systems not included in the sections above.

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
Engage and communicate with members and potential members from all types of libraries throughout the RAILS area to ensure they are aware of system programs/ services of benefit to them and to better understand, anticipate, and meet their needs	**Member Recruitment** Engage with libraries of all types that express an interest in RAILS membership. Visit potential members to ensure they meet membership criteria. Work with RAILS Board on new member recommendations for approval by ISL. **General Member Communication/Engagement** Promote available programs/services via RAILS communication tools and member visits, including: • RAILS website • Weekly *RAILS E-News* • Social media channels • *Can't Shelve This* podcast • RAILS Online Store • Visiting as many members as possible, either virtually or in person, concentrating on libraries that RAILS has not visited or had any correspondence with in the past two years • Offering online site visits to any interested library to remind them of system benefits • Offering to attend a meeting of all RAILS networking groups as specified above • Scheduling regular member updates • Using available type of library mailing lists and lists for different levels of staff to communicate about specific programs/ services of interest • Offering "New Director Welcome" online discussions • Sending all new RAILS library directors a welcome communication to acquaint them with system programs/services • Continuing to feature "RAILS Minute" videos with the RAILS Executive Director highlighting the latest system news	

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
	• Exhibiting at library conferences, including conferences for different types of libraries and different levels of staff • Presenting programs at library-related conferences as appropriate to promote RAILS programs/services Contract for continued support for new RAILS website, to include: • Custom development of Gutenberg editor • Miscellaneous design tweaks, feature development, and software and server updates Develop new Data website to house data-related projects including the SLATE data dashboard. Gather feedback from different levels of staff (including non-librarians) on how RAILS can communicate with them more effectively. Develop strategies to respond to this feedback.	
Engage and communicate with the RAILS Board of Directors to ensure that they are aware of RAILS programs and services, that they can serve as ambassadors for RAILS, and that their service on the board is as rewarding as possible	Communicate regularly with the board through the RAILS board mailing list and other means. Ensure that the board is aware of RAILS' progress in meeting the goals and objectives of our new strategic plan. Keep board informed about important issues for RAILS and for libraries of all types. Provide talking points for communicating with members about RAILS programs/services. Plan/implement orientation session at Burr Ridge service center for all new RAILS Board members. Invite existing board members to attend for a refresher. Schedule board meetings in different parts of the RAILS area as possible so the board can learn about different areas of the system and meet members from different areas. Continue to promote and encourage diversity on the RAILS Board as referenced above.	

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
	Support board conference/meeting attendance as appropriate. Work with RAILS Board Policy Committee to establish schedule for regular review of RAILS policies.	
Recruit RAILS staff as needed to meet roles specified in administrative rules and to support strategic plan goals and objectives. Actively seek a diverse staff in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identify, and other factors.	Encourage/support professional development for staff. Continue to hold regular staff meetings to keep all staff informed of the latest RAILS developments and to help staff at different service centers engage with each other. Continue work of RAILS Employee Committees to develop collaborative activities for all staff • Plan in-person staff in-service day in FY 2026 • Offer regular staff engagement activities at service centers throughout the year Continue discussions with new staff who have worked at RAILS for at least 90 days to gather input on their onboarding and orientation experiences. Make changes to RAILS' onboarding process as appropriate in response to this feedback. Update internal safety procedures and continue discussions about disaster planning In conjunction with RAILS IT, create new performance management platform to assist with automation of performance discussions Expand the new RAILS staff onboarding process to ensure that RAILS' values, mission, and organizational culture are emphasized throughout the entire onboarding experience. Continue to communicate via new HR Insights email initiative to give staff more information about key HR activities	

Objectives	Planned Activities	System Standard
	Continue to prioritize EDI-related staff activities and initiatives as referenced above	
Maintain robust technology infrastructure needed to carry out all RAILS programs/services	Replace laptops for RAILS staff and printers at all RAILS facilities. Replace aging climate control systems in Burr Ridge datacenter. Audit and improve security practices across wide area network and IT systems. Investigate and begin implementation of a new virtualization platform for cost-saving purposes. Continue to utilize project request process for staff to inform and request input on IT-related projects they are planning. Continue to develop, implement, and maintain in-house software, including apps for contract tracking, delivery routing, HR hiring and performance management. Update and expand disaster recovery plan and staff cybersecurity training. Expand cloud hosting for stability, cost savings and disaster readiness.	