

## **A Path to Public Library Services for All Illinois Residents (August 2025)**

### **Background**

Public library services grew up organically in Illinois over the past 150+ years. Because of this, we do not have a one-size-fits-all model for how those services are funded and delivered, though each existing model uses local property taxes for the majority of their operational funding.

In Illinois we currently have city libraries, village libraries, and standalone library districts. To complicate matters even more, there are different models under which cities and villages can create and govern their municipal libraries.

Within this rich tapestry of public library service providers operating across the State, there is also a very large number of “unserved” pockets scattered throughout Illinois. The residents in these unserved areas do not pay any public library taxes and thus do not automatically qualify for public library services. Some unserved areas are rural, many are suburban, while still others are adjacent to cities or villages. This plan seeks to remedy this problem by providing a path to library services for all residents living in the unserved areas of Illinois.

### **History of Similar Actions in Illinois**

In 1965 by the Illinois General Assembly passed the Illinois Public Community College Act into law. This Act created Illinois Community College Districts to ensure access to public community colleges for every resident of the State. In other words, for the past 60 years or so, every square inch of land in Illinois has fallen within a community college district, and the owners of the land have paid community college taxes, and therefore every resident of Illinois has also been a resident of their relevant community college district.

This type of complete coverage of the State can also be found in our K-12 public school system. The idea of complete public library service coverage is what we seek for all Illinois resident.

### **The Plan Outlined**

Because the landscape of public library service providers and unserved areas is so diverse across the State, there needs to be a unit of government that can act as the “agent” that will provide a path to public library services for the unserved. County Governments across the State, working in conjunction with the Illinois State Library, could easily fill this role.

I propose that we introduce a bill that mandates that all areas currently unserved by a public library gain access to public library services within 4 years of the bill’s passage, and that we task the County governments and the Illinois State Library to help make this happen.

Per this plan, each County Executive along with their County Board will conduct a study of both the unserved areas as well as the existing public library service areas within their County. This study must be completed and the findings reported to the Illinois State Library within 1 year of the passage of this new Act. Within 2 years of the passage of this new Act, each County will begin work with the Illinois State Library to determine the most sensical way to “assign” their unserved areas to an existing public library. The three ways this may be accomplished are as follows:

1. A County Board may levy a public library property tax on its unserved areas, and then use that funding to pay one of the existing public libraries within the County to provide services contractually to the unserved. The amount of money paid to the library providing contractual services needs to be in line with what said library would receive in property taxes if the contractual area were within the regular boundaries of the public library service area. The County Government, in conjunction with the Illinois State Library, will need to take many things into consideration when determining which existing public library will be contracted to provide services to

which unserved area, but it can certainly be done.

**OR**

2. A County Board may determine that an unserved area is either wholly or partially surrounded by an existing public library service area. In this case they may mandate that the unserved area be made part of the existing public library service area and immediately in the next levy cycle be added to the tax rolls for that public library. Because this is a net gain of service recipients for the public library, their property tax income would need to increase proportionally to the properties being added to their service area. Both the Illinois State Library and the governing Board of the public library will need to agree to the terms of this change.

**OR**

3. A County Board may encourage (but not mandate) that multiple existing public library service providers consider merging together into a newly formed public library District, and in the process fold in any unserved areas in between or surrounding the existing service areas. For instance, a small town that has a municipal library, its surrounding unserved areas, and a nearby library District would be given the opportunity to merge into one new, larger library district. One example of this could be in a mostly rural county where there are "islands" of public library service surrounded by unserved areas. Again, both the Illinois State Library and the governing Board of the public libraries will need to agree to the terms of this change, including what the new tax rate will be for the newly formed larger District, how the Board of the pre-existing public library entities will be dissolved and formed into one new Board, etc.

### **Conclusions**

Obviously in that last scenario above, there are a lot of complicated issues to solve. Any proposed legislation needs to be very specific about how to solve the various issues that will be encountered, what exact power the Counties will have to force existing Public Libraries to accept these changes, and what the Illinois State Library's role will be in helping break any impasses that arise.

Also, there will be resistance to this plan from some Illinois residents (and their respective politicians) as it does cause people who do not currently pay a public library tax to start paying a public library tax. I feel strongly that the two following points will help to achieve the goals of this plan:

1. Once a County levies a library tax on an unserved area to pay for contractual public library services for those residents, those residents are at that point paying public library taxes. Once that fact is established, there should be very little resistance to a change in what body they pay public library taxes to. Thus these residents should have very little problem at that point if they are folded into an existing nearby public library service area and that public library begins taxing them for services and the County stops taxing them for this purpose.
2. To my knowledge there are no counties in Illinois with complete public library service coverage, however as a rule, the more populous counties have more complete coverage than the less populous counties. This tells me that the likely opponents to this bill in the State Legislature will be greatly outnumbered and that there will not be much political risk in passing this bill for the members of the State legislature who hail from the more populous counties.

Respectfully Submitted,

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