



February 13, 2017

Mr. Eddie Favre, Hancock County Administrator
Hancock County Board of Supervisors
854 Highway 90, Suite A
Bay St. Louis, MS 39520

Dear Mr. Favre and Hancock County Supervisors:

I am writing to express support on behalf of the Mississippi Library Association for the continuation of Hancock County Library System to be administered as public libraries. This past year, the theme for our annual conference was “Mississippi Libraries: The Heart of Our Communities.” The Hancock County Library System, as administered by the Director, Courtney Thomas, certainly lives up to that theme. The library staff at the five branches of the Hancock County Library System work hard to meet the needs of their community by providing programs such as Storytime for children, knitting and crochet classes, tax aides, board games for adults, book clubs, digital media tutoring, and computer classes. Because, you see, today’s libraries aren’t just about books anymore. Today’s libraries, and especially those in Mississippi, are rural community centers where residents can not only check out books, magazines, E-books, audio books, and videos, but they can also enrich their lives. They can access technology by using the free public computers to do research, apply for jobs, create resumes, or take online classes. This vital link to technology was never more evident than on August 29, 2005 when Hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

Before the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, the Hancock County Library System had received numerous awards, including the National Award for Library Service from the Institute of Museum and Library Science in 2001 and the naming of the Bay St. Louis Library as a National Literary Landmark for the author, historian, and professor, Stephen E. Ambrose in 2003. As you know, Hurricane Katrina destroyed two of the four branches of the Hancock County Library System on that fateful day, but the Kiln Library branch opened 12 days later and the Bay St. Louis Library branch opened a month after that to return vital services to their communities. In the days and months following Katrina’s destruction, many residents of Hancock County turned to their public libraries to find information about receiving aid from MEMA, FEMA, the Red Cross, and other service organizations. Many needed Internet access to file insurance claims, use fax machines and copy machines for free, or use satellite phones to contact relatives who were concerned for their safety and well-being. And still others just wanted to check out books or bring their children to visit the library just to get back to something familiar, something normal, something they could rely on.

Over a decade later, the Hancock County Library System has been restored, now with five branches, and they continue to win awards, such as being designated a Mississippi Star Library by the Mississippi Library Commission. The communities that are served by the five branches of the Hancock County Library System have once again come to rely on their public libraries. In fact, the Hancock County Library System had 17,000 people visit their libraries each month according to their FY2016 statistics. The library system has not only recovered from devastation, but they have prospered, and so have their patrons. So why bring up the history and devastation of Hurricane Katrina? Because trying to privatize these public libraries of the Hancock County Library System would be yet another disaster.

Mississippi Code § 39-3-15 deals with the library boards of trustees and their qualifications, appointment, terms of office, and compensation of members. This law states, "The management and control of a county or municipal public library shall be vested in a board of five (5) trustees, who shall be appointed by the governing authorities of the county or municipality." Furthermore, the law also says, "Each trustee shall be a resident and qualified elector of the municipality, county or region represented by said trustee." In § 39-3-17 of the Code, the requirements for a public library director are as such: "There shall be one (1) library director for each library system. Said library system director shall have such educational qualifications as are prescribed by the Mississippi Library Commission. The library system director shall administer and establish procedures according to policies established by the administrative board of trustees. His or her duties shall include: (a) employment of staff with the approval of the board of trustees; (b) prescription of staff duties; (c) removal of staff for cause; (d) preparation of the budget; (e) financial and statistical management; (f) reporting to board of trustees; and (g) other acts necessary for the orderly and efficient administration of the library system."

As a public library director myself, I have confidence that our state statutes still hold the best interest and management of our public libraries in mind. I believe that our public libraries are an enhancement to our education system. I believe that having a board of trustees that includes residents of the community is the best way to govern a library system. I believe that having a library director with the proper education and training to manage a library system is of the utmost importance. And I believe, after hearing the evidence presented to your Board of Supervisors and listening to the voices of your constituents, you will see the wisdom in denying the privatization of your public libraries. You certainly have a library system to be proud of, and I hope that you appreciate that.

Respectfully yours,



Jenniffer Stephenson, President
Mississippi Library Association