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ALA American Library Association

February 13, 2017

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

Dear Administrator Favre and Hancock County Supervisors:

As presidents of the American Library Association (ALA) and Public Library Association (PLA), we are writing to express our full support of the staff and trustees at Hancock County Library System and we urge you to dismiss efforts to privatize this vital and vibrant community asset.

In 2001, the American Library Association adopted the following policy:

ALA affirms that publicly funded libraries should remain directly accountable to the public they serve. Therefore, the ALA opposes the shifting of policymaking and management oversight of library services for the public to the private for-profit sector.

Democracy depends on a well-informed and well-educated society in order to be self-governing. Public libraries provide access to an infinite array of ideas both present and past, our world's history, our literary heritage, and learning resources for people of all ages. Today, access to 21st-century technologies has become increasingly critical for global networking, information access, and the routine tasks of individual commerce. Professional staff and lay trustees implement policies and practices that guarantee patron privacy and access for all, without regards to means or background.

Privatizing a public service such as the library threatens two pillars of public control—accountability and transparency—and is in direct conflict with the Board of Supervisors' stated commitment to both. Library staff and trustees, as public employees and appointees, are accountable to their fellow residents of Hancock County and they ensure transparency through requirements such as open meetings, a publicly presented budget and shared decision making. A private company is accountable to its investors and typically does not disclose its budget; therefore, a community will not know how their taxpayer dollars are spent or how much is diverted to corporate profits. Also, policies will be developed and approved away from the public eye and without public input.

Furthermore, moving to a privately-operated library system will jeopardize its ability to raise money from sources such as grants, donations, and gifts. A for-profit entity may not be eligible to participate in the same resource sharing programs that the public library offers. Moreover, Hancock Public Library has deeply rooted connections to the community through its trustees, foundation members, and volunteers. A shift away from a public service, non-profit focus to a privately-run, for-profit model will diminish these critical structures and connections.

The professional staff at each public library works hand-in-hand with library trustees to ensure that residents' needs and interests are at the core of their mission and their everyday work. Hancock County librarians do this expertly, with a commitment to inquiry, access and the free exchange of ideas. In 2016, Hancock County

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Library System was named a Mississippi Star Library by the Mississippi Library Commission, recognizing the return on investment it provides to the community as measured by visits, program attendance, computer usage, and materials circulation. The high standards and quality of service already in place may well be at risk with privatized management.

As association leaders who have had the privilege of visiting public libraries across the country, we know that no two libraries are alike, but that successful libraries share something in common: a deep commitment and connection to the communities they serve. Hancock County Libraries exemplify this quality. More than 78% of the county's residents are registered users of their five branches. From children's programming to job training and technology classes, Hancock Libraries work in partnership with the community and other organizations to meet residents' needs. Hancock County and its residents are stronger and more successful because of their library system.

At ALA and PLA, we vigorously support libraries that are answerable to the people they serve. We believe that the Hancock County Library System has demonstrated its commitment and value to the community, and we believe that maintaining this transparent, locally- and publicly-governed library system is the best path forward for the residents of Hancock County.

Sincerely,



Julie Beth Todaro, Ph.D.
President
American Library Association



Felton Thomas, Jr.
President
Public Library Association

cc: Jenniffer Stephenson, President, Mississippi Library Association