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Aldermen ask county to support proposal that would give Port more money for serving non-libraried areas

Port Washington aldermen last week asked Ozaukee County to support a five-year library plan that would increase the amount of money the Niederkorn Library receives for providing services to residents of areas without their own libraries.

Currently, the library is reimbursed for 85% of the cost to provide services to these residents, Library Director David Nimmer said.

The proposed library plan, which would affect all libraries in Ozaukee County, would increase that reimbursement to 93% by 2015, with an eye toward eventually fully reimbursing libraries for the cost of serving people in non-libraried areas, Nimmer said.

About 21% of the library services go to residents outside the city, he said.

“That’s significant,” Nimmer said.

Most aldermen agreed, saying full reimbursement is a matter of fairness.

“Effectively, our taxpayers are carrying some of the town taxpayers,” Ald. Tom Hudson, a member of the Port Library Board, said.

“It’s kind of an inequity. We make our library available to them, and I think that’s a wonderful thing, but they only pay us 85 cents on the dollar. I don’t think that’s quite fair. Everybody should carry their share of the load.”

City Administrator Mark Grams said the Niederkorn Library is used by more residents of the non-libraried areas than any other in the county.

“We’d like to see 100% reimbursement,” he said, noting it would increase the library’s revenues by $18,000.

Although the proposed library plan only calls for a 93% reimbursement, Nimmer said, “It is a step in the right direction.”

Ald. Mike Ehrlich asked why the reimbursement was not set at 100% to begin with.

When the Eastern Shores Library System was established roughly 16 years ago, the reduced reimbursement rate was a compromise intended to get enough votes to approve the system, Nimmer said.

State law requires a minimum 70% reimbursement, he added.

“At the time, it was felt that (the reduced rate was needed so) the non-libraried areas wouldn’t be hit too severely,” Nimmer said.

Ald. Dan Becker, who is also an Ozaukee County supervisor, cast the lone vote against the city’s resolution urging the county to adopt the higher reimbursement rates.

Becker said he plans to vote against the five-year library plan when it comes before the County Board for a number of reasons, including the reimbursement rate.

“I can’t support this plan. Overall, I think it’s a disadvantage to taxpayers in the county,” he said.

The increased reimbursement would result in higher taxes for residents of non-libraried areas, he added.

“I don’t want to increase taxes on anyone, especially in this economic environment,” Becker said.

But Hudson noted, increasing the reimbursement would offset city taxes paid to maintain the library.

The county has sought input from communities on the proposed library plan. The response has been mixed, with some communities favoring the reimbursement increase and others opposing it.

In its resolution to the county, Port officials noted that the tax rate for residents of non-libraried areas has decreased from 30 cents per $1,000 valuation to 24 cents

in the last five years. This year, the resolution states, even if the reimbursement formula were set at 93%, the tax rate would still have decreased.

The city doesn’t provide any other service to residents outside its border without full reimbursement, officials noted.