



WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

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A New Chapter: Options for Preserving Library Services in South Milwaukee

Fiscal constraints prompt city leaders to explore new options

The city of South Milwaukee has reached a crossroads in providing library services, which will require its residents and policymakers to gauge the value of current library services and possibly consider alternative models, a new [Wisconsin Policy Forum report](#) finds.

The report, commissioned by the city of South Milwaukee, is meant to illuminate the challenges faced by the city's public library, while also offering a menu of potential solutions.

The city's broader fiscal constraints have forced it to erode budget support over time for its library. This, in turn, has led to reductions in library staffing and hours that undermined attempts to boost library visits and usage back to pre-pandemic levels.

Meanwhile, the nearly 60-year-old library building now has capital needs that will require sizable investment. In light of these challenges, and the need to maintain other areas of the city budget, city leaders now feel compelled to consider less costly approaches for library services.

Our analysis relied on data from the city, its library, and the state Department of Public Instruction, as well as interviews with local officials and stakeholders. We found that if South Milwaukee residents and policymakers wish to maintain a library in their city – and halt or modestly reverse the erosion of library services – then the logical option would be to hold a referendum to allow voters to decide whether to increase property taxes to fund it.

If South Milwaukee residents do not wish to pay more for library services, then several options may exist to downsize the city's library, or eliminate it by contracting with the Milwaukee County Federated Library System or partnering with a neighboring community like the city of Cudahy.

“In weighing the options,” the report finds, “policymakers and citizens would need to consider whether it is preferable to maintain a smaller library with limited hours in South Milwaukee or share a larger library with expanded hours in an adjacent community.”

Library budget cut, but demand for services remains

South Milwaukee has had a public library since 1917 and has operated out of its current building since 1967. But now, several factors have brought the library to an inflection point. The city's budget has been affected by the same fiscal pressures affecting many Wisconsin municipalities, such as state property tax limits, a historically tight labor market, and inflationary cost increases.

This has led to reductions over time in staffing and in city support for the library. Its 2025 operating budget totals \$647,051, which is a 19.7% reduction from the 2019 library budget. Meanwhile, the library budgeted for 6.4 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff positions in 2025, down from 8.0 FTE

positions in 2019. These cuts have resulted in South Milwaukee's library now being open for fewer hours than any other public library in Milwaukee County.

South Milwaukee also is among the municipalities in the county that provide the least amount of local revenue per resident to their libraries. As of 2023, South Milwaukee's library ranked 13th of the 15 libraries in Milwaukee County in the amount of local revenue support it received per resident, which primarily comes from local property taxes.

Despite its reduced budget, demand for South Milwaukee's library services remains strong. After the pandemic caused library usage to drop dramatically, the library's circulation and program participation numbers have rebounded to pre-pandemic levels. Visits to the library remain down considerably, however, which likely is influenced to some extent by its shortened hours.

Surveying the options

Our report lays out a range of options for South Milwaukee leaders to consider, including:

Maintaining the status quo: This would not require additional revenue and would maintain the city's library in its present location, but would likely result in further cuts to library staffing and hours as inflation likely outpaces flat revenues.

Downsizing and moving to the city's municipal building: This would maintain the library's current hours while decreasing its expenditures, but would diminish its footprint, staffing, collections, and programming.

Downsizing within the current library building: This would reduce the library's size at its current location while converting a portion into a commercial space. It could maintain the library's current hours while cutting costs, but would diminish its staffing, collections, and programming. Also, existing vacancies in the area suggest that securing a commercial tenant may be difficult.

Raising revenue to restore services: This would entail holding a referendum to ask South Milwaukee voters for authority to exceed state-imposed property tax limits to restore funding to the library. If approved, it could enable the library to return to pre-pandemic levels of staffing and hours.

Closing the library and contracting for service with the countywide system: South Milwaukee is required by law to provide its residents with access to library services. Under this scenario, it could contract with the Milwaukee County Federated Library System to ensure such access to libraries in other Milwaukee County communities, while reimbursing the system for such usage.

Partnering with neighbors to form a joint library: While it would require South Milwaukee residents to travel farther to access a library, creating a joint Cudahy-South Milwaukee library could allow both communities to realize substantial savings while expanding library services for Cudahy residents.

Building a new library in a mixed-use development: This likely would involve multi-family housing built above a first-floor library. It could bring economic value to the community, though upfront costs could be substantial. Meanwhile, this option would not necessarily resolve South Milwaukee's pressing challenge of maintaining sufficient funding for library operations. [Click here](#) to read the report.

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