

Jefferson, Waukesha counties forming library system

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JEFFERSON — On Jan. 1, 2016, Jefferson and Waukesha counties will join to create a new system designed to provide improved library services to residents of both areas.

Currently, the 16 public libraries in Waukesha County are alone in the Waukesha County Federated Library System (WCFLS). The public libraries of Jefferson County — which include those in Fort Atkinson, Jefferson, Johnson Creek, Lake Mills, Palmyra, Waterloo, Watertown and Whitewater — have been part of the Mid-Wisconsin Federated Library System (MWFLS), along with Dodge and Washington counties, since 1980. They will join the Waukesha system.

The Cambridge Public Library is, and will remain, a member of the South Central Library System.

Wisconsin's regional library systems, formed in the 1970s and 1980s, are state agencies based on county affiliations. They are charged with providing services that strengthen and improve member libraries.

“There are many opportunities for regional library systems to offer services that would be difficult for most libraries to provide independently,” explained Connie Meyer, director of the Waukesha County Federated Library System. “CAFÉ, our Waukesha County shared catalog, is an example of a powerful resource operated by the Federated Library System. Library systems are an excellent example of how collaborations can achieve efficiencies and improve effectiveness.”

In December 2014, the Jefferson County Library Board began a comprehensive study of the different library systems to which the libraries of Jefferson County could belong.

“It seemed like a no-brainer to look at different systems, but it wasn't a guarantee that we were going to do it. We only were going to do it if it was going to benefit the libraries,” Sue Hartwick, past-president of the Jefferson County Library Board, said.

After much research and discussion, the board voted unanimously to seek a partnership with WCFLS.

“The Jefferson County Library Board took a thorough look at five library systems and determined that Waukesha County is an excellent system and the best fit for our county,” said Linda Ager, president of the Jefferson County Library Board. “(Changing library systems) happens very infrequently. It's a big process.”

In March, the WCFLS board unanimously endorsed Jefferson County's partnership request and made a proposal that in turn approved by the Jefferson County Library Board. At that time, Jefferson County commenced the statutory process required to withdraw from the Mid-Wisconsin Federated Library System and WCFLS began the steps required to expand to a two-county library system.

“We are excited about the opportunities that will present themselves as we add the high caliber libraries of Jefferson County to our library system,” said Meyer, former director of Fort Atkinson's Dwight Foster Public Library. “We will find cost savings for our member libraries through economies of scale, increase access to

materials for all of our citizens and improve our library system's ability to meet its mission. It's not often that the opportunity to realize savings also results in improving services, but we believe this proposal offers a rare opportunity to do both."

Ager concurred with Meyer's assessment.

"This is a true win-win because there are clear benefits for both counties," noted the Jefferson County Library Board president. "After the switch, Jefferson County residents will immediately notice they have more databases and can check out more books and other materials. Behind the scenes, our libraries will benefit from the strong leadership, veteran staff, technological capabilities and the clear vision offered by the new system."

Kelly TerKeurst, current director of the Dwight Foster Public Library, expressed her delight at having opportunities to provide more materials.

"We're going to have a lot of access to a great system, and that's really exciting," she said. "We'll have access to the Waukesha County libraries ... and so much more than we already had."

There is an annual cost to belong to a library system and, although the cost of WCFLS might be a bit more, there will be things Jefferson County libraries will no longer need to spend money on individually. The additional cost will be covered by the individual libraries.

"We're now increasing what we can offer and I'm very proud of that. I'm very pleased that we're going to be part of a forward-thinking system — that's very exciting," Hartwick said. "They get it. The staff at Mid-Wisconsin had one certified librarian: the director. Waukesha has five certified librarians. When they make a decision, they're always thinking 'how is this going to help libraries?'"

With the addition of Jefferson County, the Waukesha County Federated Library System will be seeking a new name and appointing a new library system board consisting of residents from both counties. Both will take effect on Jan. 1, 2016.

"We think it's going to be a step up in library services," Hartwick said. "Overall, we think it's a good step forward and we're very proud of the library board for taking on the work. We're proud of our librarians for thinking this is a good thing, even though (changing the system) is going to cause them some grief over the next few months."

To learn more, visit the WCFLS website at www.wcfls.org or view its Facebook page.