



September 30, 2009

Rob Maier, Director
Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners
98 North Washington Street, Suite 401
Boston, MA 02114

Dear Rob and Members of the Board of Library Commissioners,

Statewide services are at a major crossing, and the road we take will have major implications for our libraries and residents for many years to come. It is services that meet the needs of libraries and residents that have to be at the forefront of any restructuring effort. We are extremely concerned that a restructuring that is not thoughtfully and thoroughly considered will irreparably damage services to the citizens of the Commonwealth.

The SEMLS Board has been anticipating that there would be a restructuring of the regional library systems with the assumption that there would be fewer in the future. We hate to see a restructuring occur as a result of a financial crisis instead of careful planning. As the Board plans for this massive reduction in state funding, we hope that it examines carefully the multitude of statewide services regions offer and continues to offer services that support the multi-type environment, which benefits the entire library community. We would like to recommend that the MBLC looks at various models as it implements the cuts to this line. We need to take the time to determine which model provides the services that libraries and the Commonwealth's citizenry should have. We need to continue to support a multi-type regional system; our strength is that we work together for the common good.

Any restructuring must address the Statute creating regional library systems and must update the Code of Regulations that will tie the hands of any new entity. Services should be offered because of need and not because they are required by law. We need to establish an agile structure that can respond efficiently and effectively to rapid changes in the environment.

As all the regions will tell you, when members are asked about services the regional provide, three come to the forefront: delivery, continuing education and electronic databases. Of these three, procurement of electronic databases could easily become a statewide program.

Delivery service is important for all libraries and makes resource sharing happen. Even in the best of times it has been impossible to provide delivery services to all members. We need to maintain the service we do today. Today, SEMLS members receive great delivery service; there have been times in the past when we couldn't say this. It is the coordination, oversight, and contract negotiation of the region that makes a delivery system as good as it is.

We believe that the current regional model serves the continuing education needs of members well. Trainings are brought on-site or are located close by. Members are offered an array of workshops that range from library issues to technology training. Our libraries need to be known as learning communities with knowledgeable and trained staff, and this has to be a strong commitment of statewide services.

It is the myriad of other regional programs that could be in jeopardy as a result of no funding or by the fact that they are overlooked in the restructuring process. We would like to highlight a few but want you to recognize that even though others aren't mentioned, libraries need them.

On site and personal consulting services are essential. Libraries need to know that there is someone available to assist them with their long-range and space planning needs; someone that can meet with library boards and others to talk about library issues; someone that can help them implement grants that they receive and someone that can assist them with personnel and administrative issues.

MassCat has brought almost 100 libraries into the resource sharing environment. It has provided these libraries with late 20th century library services. It is a cost effective service for many school libraries and small public libraries.

Cooperative purchasing programs provides substantial discounts to libraries and is so needed in this fiscal crisis.

The summer reading program reaches over 20,000 citizens each year. It promotes year round literacy and works as a partnership between the public and school libraries in many communities.

Statewide services need to assist libraries with their Web presence. These are just a fraction of the services that regions provide. It is our hope that each and every service will be examined carefully as this new structure evolves.

We know that the Board has to make difficult decisions as it submits a budget that further reduces funding for statewide services. We commend the Board's decision to maintain the state aid program. We also realize that line 9401 will most likely take the brunt of the mandated budget submission.

For many years, the Regional Library Systems have worked with the MBLC to further the Agency's mission of supporting, improving and promoting library service across the state.

We are committed to this mission, and you can count on our assistance as we plan for the future of statewide services.

Sincerely,

Michael Somers, President
SEMLS Executive Board