Office for Intellectual Freedom

December 6, 2022

St. Marys City Commission
200 South 7th Street
St. Marys, Kansas

To the members of the St. Marys City Commission:

As the preeminent non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services in the United States, the American Library Association has long fought to preserve the public library as a community institution that provides free and unfettered access to a wide range of information and ideas for all the people of the community.

As community institutions, libraries have a particular responsibility to avoid bias and ensure that their materials and programs represent a variety of viewpoints and encompass all topics of interest, including those that might be controversial or even objectionable to some in the community. In addition, public libraries have a particular responsibility to operate in accordance with the First Amendment, which protects the right of every person to access and receive information in the public library, free from any government censorship.

It is for this reason that I write to urge you to reject any proposal to terminate the longstanding lease for the Pottawatomie Wabaunsee Regional Library solely on the grounds that some in the community object to the ideas or views contained in the library’s collection.

The ACLU of Kansas has identified the legal and Constitutional infirmities of the proposal, and the Kansas Library Association has written eloquently on the professional responsibility of librarians and libraries to serve the public good by avoiding censorship, upholding individual liberty, and ensuring that the library’s collections reflect a variety of beliefs and meet a range of information needs. I will not repeat that information here.

Instead, I want to emphasize the potential loss to the community that will result if you decide to evict the library solely to prevent your community’s residents from accessing ideas some find objectionable but others wish to access and read.

What the proposal does is place at risk the St. Marys community’s ability to have a library at all—a library that supports early literacy and homeschooling families, provides programming and cultural enrichment for all ages, offers internet devices and online connectivity, builds digital literacy, supports job seekers and small businesses, and offers a community gathering space for all. Communities without libraries find that they are less able to attract and hire high-quality workers; homes and property in communities that lack libraries are less attractive to buyers, especially when they can choose adjacent communities that do have them; and local businesses and entrepreneurs lose the ability to take advantage of the resources the library provides, from planning and research tools to working and meeting space.
Librarians and library staff take their responsibilities to the community seriously, and have put in place policies that allow parents to guide their child’s reading while preserving the ability of each parent and each family to make their own decisions about what books and resources they read.

As your own residents have shared, the St. Marys Library is an essential part of the community and is a community resource cherished by your residents, and we want to commend Judith Cremer and her staff for the excellent library service they provide to the community of St. Marys. Given the ability of parents to work with the library to address their concerns about any particular book, I ask and encourage you to renew the lease of the Pottawatomie Wabaunsee Regional Library without condition to ensure that the library, its collection, and its services remain a community asset for St. Marys for many more years to come.

Sincerely,

Deborah Caldwell Stone
Director, Office for Intellectual Freedom
American Library Association