

EDITORIAL

Every town, no matter how small, needs a good library

In rural communities especially, libraries are more than places to read or borrow books.

By [The Editorial Board](#) Updated July 14, 2024, 4:00 a.m.



Doug Pratt walked into the one-room Robertson Memorial Library in Leyden on July 3. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Leyden's library is the size of a book-filled living room. There's a brisk trade in popular fiction. Because the town is small, bestsellers are often stocked when other libraries have waiting lists. A back wall has a single shelf of nonfiction. Researchers tend to go to regional or academic libraries that have bigger selections — and more tables.

One Monday afternoon, a mother brought her daughter to sign up for a summer reading program. A man came in seeking a bestseller and left with a hiking guide. An older woman wanted a book she forgot the title of, but librarian Karin Parks still found it for her.



Karin Parks is the librarian at the Robertson Memorial Library in Leyden. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

The 432-square-foot Robertson Memorial Library is the heart of Leyden, a rural community with 738 residents, no coffee shop, no businesses beyond farm stands, and not even its own school. People come to chat and pick up books. It's also a relic of a past era. Books are checked out with date stamp cards. Only Parks can request interlibrary loans, so if someone wants a book not the shelves, they must ask her. The library has front steps, and with the building up against the road, there's no room for a wheelchair ramp. Library patrons who need a bathroom cross the street to the old town hall.

When Parks took the job in 2019, she sought to bring the library, in her words, "into this century." But joining the Western and Central Massachusetts regional

library network cost \$7,000 a year. The library's budget was \$30,309.58 for the fiscal year that ended June 30. The town wouldn't support the extra expense.

Recently, the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners awarded Leyden's library grants that will lower the cost of joining to \$640. That, Parks said with a smile, they can afford. The library will soon begin barcoding books and scanning them into a database. Residents will gain access to e-books, audio books, and databases, and will be able to request books from other libraries. Parks envisions lending laptops and teaching seniors to use e-books.



A young library patron selected books to take out from the Robertson Memorial Library in Leyden. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

It's a privilege every Commonwealth resident should have.

While every library that meets certain conditions gets some state aid, the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners has started offering programs targeted at smaller communities, including a special library construction [grant](#) and a [program](#) to help libraries join regional networks.

State policy makers should do more to meet the unique needs of small rural libraries. These libraries need more money, and one way to ensure they get it would be for state lawmakers to set aside some library funding specifically for rural libraries, so that they are not competing with bigger institutions. Many could also use more training in specialized areas like serving patrons experiencing homelessness or people with disabilities.

In urban centers around Boston, libraries are ubiquitous and bustling. City libraries in Boston and Cambridge have multiple branches, extensive hours, specialized staff, and a plethora of materials. But drive two hours west and libraries look different. There are still active, busy libraries that are vital community gathering places. There are also those open just 10 hours a week, that employ a lone librarian, and that lack a bathroom, meeting room, or young adult section.

Small towns without businesses rely on residential property taxes to fund not just their police and fire departments but also their libraries. Even in towns where residents strongly support the library, there's often little money available for books and librarians.

To be sure, library use fell during the pandemic. [In 2023](#), according to the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners, there were nearly 26 million

visitors to state libraries, down from [37 million](#) in 2019. That mirrors [national data](#) showing library visits declining over the past decade, a trend accelerated by the pandemic.

But libraries remain vital to communities as meeting spaces and sources of reliable information. To that end, no community should be deterred by cost from participating in a regional network, and every library should be able to meet basic capital needs, like a solid roof.

Take Orange, where the select board in May considered [defunding the library](#) due to a [budget shortfall](#). Town leaders ultimately agreed to keep the library open with [fewer hours](#) but are scrambling to maintain the 100-year-old building after voters in previous years declined to approve renovation plans.

The library is seeking a grant to repair a leaky roof that is covered by a tarp. Recently, to replace a failing computer server, the library collected empty bottles and cans. Candy Cross, chair of the library board of trustees, thinks the drive will raise \$2,000, but the redemption center lacked capacity to accept the second of two trucks so the cans remain in a trustee's garage.

Tyringham faces similar challenges. Its library, serving a town of 423, is open just 10 hours a week. After librarian Catherine Mardula moved away temporarily for personal reasons, the two other library trustees covered the shifts: 92-year-old Mary Garner, who plans to retire, and Louisa Marsh, a local bookseller still in training. "In smaller towns, one or two people wear every hat," Mardula said.

The library [recently joined](#) the regional network and Marsh is now trying to spread word that the library has an array of new resources. A Tyringham native,

she recalled that while writing a book on physics, she had to buy books from a store where she worked or borrow them from Pittsfield’s library because she couldn’t get what she needed in Tyringham.

There are also success stories. In Blandford, the library reports that patronage has more than doubled since 2017, around the time it joined a regional network. In 2023, the library was visited nearly 3,000 times and patrons checked out more than 9,200 items — extraordinary for a town of just 1,200 people. Library director Nicole Daviau said the library, open 28 hours a week, is a meeting place where seniors seek help with internet access, children attend programs, and adults meet neighbors. It lends out internet hot spots, DVDs, and games, and has a Pokemon club for children and a book club.

Not every small town has the population to justify the daily library services that exist in suburban and urban communities or in larger regional libraries that serve patrons from surrounding towns. According to [state data](#), only a few libraries are still unconnected to a regional network. But small towns rely on their libraries, especially when they lack gathering places like restaurants, museums, or school auditoriums.

As Leyden library trustee Tom Raffensperger said while browsing the shelves, “The library’s a community center more than just a provider of books.” A library can, and should, be both.

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Motorcycle64

7/14/24 - 6:31AM

OMG, I couldn't live without a library. It's a necessity, like air and food, but most of all it's brain food! Thank you Ms. Parks.



BecknBuv

7/14/24 - 6:47AM

Libraries do so much more than they did when I was a kid. I'm very grateful to live in a town with a beautiful and vibrant library with lots of programs for all ages and a great and helpful staff.



RonNewman

7/14/24 - 7:18AM

The Minuteman Library Network is one of the great benefits of living in Somerville, Cambridge, or any of the other cities and suburbs that are part of it. I didn't even know that there were still towns on our state without access to regional networks.



eastgategirl

7/14/24 - 2:42PM

The CLAMS system makes it possible for anyone on the Cape to



check out a book or other materials from any Cape library. In addition, the Commonwealth Catalogue is available to us. All of our libraries sponsor programs of community interest. And don't forget that during the McCarthy era, libraries stood up for the privacy of their patrons. Defunding libraries is a step towards banning books and then towards banning information and ideas.



Beth238

7/14/24 - 7:20AM

Libraries are essential to communities. They now have changed to offer so much more than reading materials. For many towns they are the epicenter of community, bringing together people.



BobbiD

7/14/24 - 8:27AM

The dilemma facing this and other libraries in small towns in Massachusetts reflects a larger problem. While there are still many towns, especially in Central and Western Massachusetts, that are defined as rural by the state government, policy mostly supports an increasing urbanization of the state. The 617 area code wields disproportionate influence in the state. We have an obligation to integrate all regions of the state in as many ways as we can. Access to one of the regional electronic networks is now a basic library service, not a luxury. Children in rural communities deserve access to the same resources as those in urban areas



PogMoThoin504

7/14/24 - 8:47AM

Absolutely. I love our local library. (It's unthinkable- I actually agree with a Globe editorial!)



bookworm1952

7/14/24 - 9:32AM

Thank you for spotlighting libraries!!



kat1235

7/14/24 - 9:46AM

The beautiful Petersham library is amazing!
Definitely the heart of this small community, it provides so many wonderful services, programs, and community gatherings for children and adults alike.

Their librarian is amazing, as is their entire staff. I couldn't live without this much- loved little library. It brings us all together as a community.



Flamingo-lover

7/14/24 - 10:56AM

When a local community cannot financially support a library, the state must step in. An educated populace is critical to everyone's future.



SOXINPA

7/14/24 - 11:25AM



SOXINPA

7/14/24 - 11:20AM

AH yes, yet another absolutely required funding need for the Progressive State. An endless 'must have' list.

I happen to love physical books. I buy physical books. I am old.

Soon, I will die off and the bulk of my physical book loving demographic will go with me. Sorry folks! You're all on the same road!

At some point, libraries need to become a simple community center, with a staff member who has some internet expertise. The entire physical necessity of a stocked library will become an antiquarian interest.



BecknBuv

7/14/24 - 11:16PM

Sox so you have all the books you want at your disposal,so nobody else matters! The libraries in my town provide enrichment programming for young children, teenagers, older people, and everyone else in town. Travel programs, book clubs, computer training, English lessons, Projects and discussion groups... Who needs it!? SoxinPA has everything he needs.....



Justice09

7/15/24 - 4:56PM

Gad you buy books. Maybe it's time to start reading some.



JQ Public

7/14/24 - 12:38PM

Not a criticism of the article, but it would have been nice to include Andrew Carnegie's bequest that built 43 libraries in Massachusetts alone, some of which are architectural gems. There seems to be a background question here as to how all these little towns were able to build such nice libraries. Wikipedia link, below. Carnegie said "The man who dies rich dies disgraced." His bequest had long-lasting, substantial societal impact, possibly more so than endowing hospitals, colleges, and summer camps.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Carnegie_libraries_in_Massachusetts



Libertacion

7/14/24 - 12:55PM

I agree that a well stocked library is supportive of an educated populace. However, some wealthy towns, Westborough, sows a preference for the McMansion types denying a library update. It is both disgusting and embarrassing. Wish the McMansion population with their no sidewalk, live in my bubble people might get out of their bubble once in a while.



Wmassgus

7/14/24 - 1:00PM

I don't know if this is still the policy however if it is it should be changed. I lived in Hampden in 2005 . There were funding issues. The town meeting voted down library funds. Because of this the MA Board of Library Commissioners decertified the library. Because of this Hamden residents could not access many of the functions of other libraries. All MA residents with a library cards from their town

can access any devices in any town library in MA. Residents of towns with decertified libraries can only access the physical reading materials in those libraries, but can't check them out. No computers, no requesting materials available at other state libraries or any other services libraries offer. Besides town taxes the residents of Hamden & similar towns pay state & Federal taxes that provide much of the funds that support ALL STATE LIBRARIES. It is vindictive to shut off access to these resources to residents who contribute to their funding.

People will argue that these towns decisions were made knowing this result and people choose to live in these small towns. Remember that there are many people who live in the larger towns & cities who use the many assets of these small towns. Some own vacation properties, day trips, vacations and taking advantage of all the outdoors and nature have to offer. Not all contributions can be found on tax ledgers.



Wmassgus

7/14/24 - 1:12PM

<https://www.npr.org/2005/07/05/4729499/mass-town-locks-doors-on-public-library>



Boilerbuilder

7/14/24 - 2:15PM

I hate to say it but the internet has made libraries obsolete. There is far more information available at your keyboard than in a brick and mortar library.

Another issue, the public library in Bloomington Indiana fills up with homeless creeps every day.



murtycroops

7/14/24 - 4:25PM

Google won't help you find just the right thing you are looking for, they sell ads. And not everyone has Wi-Fi or even the skills to use a computer. Libraries are essential for many, and they are for the housed and unhoused just the same.



Justice09

7/15/24 - 4:57PM

I don't think you hate to say it at all, and I know you are wrong.



RonNewman

7/15/24 - 11:27PM

Libraries aren't just about "information". Have you heard of fiction?

Show fewer replies ^



Wmassgus

7/14/24 - 2:56PM

Libraries are not obsolete. In today's libraries internet access is available. There are many people who do not have internet access because of their financial situation or they live in the small towns where WiFi is not easily accessed as it is not financially feasible for internet providers to wire anything except the town center where the libraries are located..Not all people are internet savvy and help in

navigating the web is available. As stated in the editorial today's libraries are much more than information depots. Homework help, children's groups, senior groups (were now seeing the effects covid isolation had on these groups) People are social animals. All citizens deserve access to all today's libraries have to offer.

As far as the homeless, that is a different issue however the word you use to describe them pretty much let's us know your opinion of the less fortunate.



adriannel

7/14/24 - 3:44PM

The Globe editorial staff is just now noticing that libraries are in trouble? Where were you guys 18 years ago?



murtycroops

7/14/24 - 4:28PM

Reminder that if you live in MA you can have a Boston Public Library card, physical or electronic. Here's a link to get the e-card:

<https://www.bpl.org/ecard/>



Wmassgus

7/14/24 - 6:59PM

Great post murtycroops. We need to find a way to get this information out to those without Globe subscriptions or internet access.



Justice09

7/15/24 - 5:34PM

Uh, go to the library?



Justice09

7/15/24 - 5:03PM

uh, go to the library?



Justice09

7/15/24 - 5:35PM

Sorry guys I was at the library reading the globe, and put this comment in the wrong place.

Please [login](#) to comment
