

Opinion: Fact-Based Decisions Are Crucial for the Future of Samuels Public Library

By Lewis Moten, Trustee at large, Samuels Public Library

During the October 29 joint meeting of the Warren County Board of Supervisors and Library Trustees, I asked a critical question: *“Is there some kind of value that you’re expecting from the library that you’re just not getting? Are we missing out on something that you expect?”* Dr. Jamieson, Supervisor for the North River District, responded, *“Not from my point of view.”* He emphasized a focus on the competitive process and fiduciary responsibility, stating, *“Having more performance metrics given to me isn’t really going to be meaningful.”*

This response left me questioning how we can effectively measure success or identify opportunities for improvement without data. Metrics are essential tools for assessing progress, pinpointing weaknesses, and guiding evidence-based decisions. Dismissing their value undermines any effort to make informed, transparent changes.

I reminded the Board of Supervisors during the meeting that Samuels Public Library has already undergone multiple in-depth reviews to evaluate its operations—whether as a non-profit, for-profit, or municipal library. These reviews, the most recent conducted in 2017, required significant time, resources, and funding. Since then, the library has been flat-funded, with no additional resources allocated for further evaluations.

I also made it clear that if the county has concerns about how funds are being spent, it is imperative to identify specific issues immediately. Without clearly defined concerns, proposing drastic governance changes—or the urgency to implement them—seems unwarranted.

The “2023 Library Debrief & Research Report” has been cited as justification for these proposals, but my analysis reveals glaring inaccuracies in its financial conclusions. As someone with over 25 years of experience in IT and performing data analysis, I often ensure the underlying data supports claims—because failing to do so invites others to disprove conclusions. Here are two critical issues I found in the report’s financial analysis:

Budget Growth Misrepresented: The report claims that library funding growth from 2006 to 2018 outpaced population growth and inflation. However, this period includes the 2010 relocation to Criser Road, which required significant staffing and operational cost increases for a facility 2.5 times larger. The move alone accounted for a 25.7% budget growth in 2010. Additionally, county funding absorbed contributions previously made by the town, artificially inflating the growth figures.

The true period of accelerated growth occurred from 2007–2011, with an average annual increase of 14.4%. Outside of this period, funding growth stabilized at 3.9%—a reasonable figure in line with inflation. This contradicts the report’s implication of unsustainable growth and aligns with the library’s current proposal for incremental funding increases leading to a standard 3% inflationary growth rate over five years.

Staff Costs Misunderstood: The report criticizes staff costs but fails to provide context. Year-over-year salaries for full-time staff at Samuels are comparable to those at Handley Regional Library. The higher per capita cost at Samuels is a result of economies of scale—Handley serves a population over three times larger, which naturally reduces its cost per capita. When compared to libraries serving similar-sized populations, Samuels demonstrates a high level of efficiency.

To provide a more accurate picture, I compiled detailed reports comparing Samuels' metrics with those of Handley and other comparable libraries:

- **Library Cardholders:** Samuels serves a community with 28% more library cardholders per capita than Handley.
- **Program Attendance:** Samuels has 66% more program attendees per full-time-equivalent (FTE) than Handley.
- **Visitor Numbers:** Samuels sees 20% more visitors per FTE than Handley.
- **Transactions Per Staff Member:** Since moving to Criser Road, transactions per FTE have steadily increased, with Samuels now outperforming Handley in this area.

These metrics clearly demonstrate that Samuels is meeting the needs of the community efficiently and effectively.

Staffing remains the library's largest expense, and Samuels faces fierce competition from local businesses offering higher wages for less skilled roles. Rising wages and benefits make it increasingly difficult to hire and retain qualified staff without additional county funding. This strain is further exacerbated by the library absorbing maintenance costs previously covered by the county, leaving fewer resources for staffing.

The proposal to create a Warren County Library Board without a thorough, fact-based evaluation is both rushed and unwise. The October 29 meeting, along with subsequent discussions, revealed that decisions are being driven by vague concerns rather than clear evidence or well-defined goals. If the county truly seeks to improve library services, it must first articulate what "better" looks like, ensure those expectations are reasonable for a library serving Warren County's population, and allocate resources for an unbiased evaluation.

If the county genuinely wants to improve library services, it must first establish what "better" looks like, ensure the expectations are reasonable for a library serving a population of this size, and allocate resources for an unbiased, in-depth evaluation.

To my representative from the North River District, Dr. Jamieson, I ask you to vote "no" on the proposal to form a new library board. Let us focus on building upon the library's legacy with thoughtful, fact-based decisions rather than undermining it with rushed and reactionary changes.

Samuels Public Library is an irreplaceable resource. Its governance structure should reflect its long-standing commitment to transparency, excellence, and service to the community it serves so well.