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Column: Library funding faces uncertain future under President Donald Trump's orders



A protestor dressed in a Donald Trump costume in Gurnee over the weekend. (Steve Sadin/For the Lake County News-Sun)



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Thousands of Lake Countians were on the march over the weekend to protest what's been happening as the administration of President Donald Trump enters its fourth month. Most were ordinary Americans, not wild-eyed left-wingers as all the president's men would have us believe.

Indeed, many hadn't ever manned a picket line, but there they were, crowding around the busy intersection of Grand Avenue and Hunt Club Road in Gurnee, which is not exactly a hotbed of revolutionary fervor. The rally was one of several held in Lake County, across the U.S. and around the world on April 5.

Those assembled were voicing opposition to many of the wild moves coming from the White House in the early days of Trump's second term: Aristocratic tariffs pasted on our trading partners; declining retirement savings; stripping heroic deeds of Black and Latino veterans from government museums and Websites; fears about the future of Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid; the loss of federal workers at crucial agencies; curtailing free speech.

One of the cuts the Trump administration is eyeing is the elimination of the Institute of Museum & Library Services. IMLS, an independent government agency with a budget of around \$295 million — .0046% of the federal budget — is the key source of federal support for the nation's libraries, museums and educational institutions.

As of March 31, all staff at IMLS were placed on 90-day administrative leaves. The potential elimination of IMLS, which is up for reauthorization by Congress in September, will impact every library, including many in Lake County. Grant awards in 2024 included a \$240,000 grant for the Chicago History Museum.

It's ironic that the plans to gut the agency came just before National Library Week, which is marked through April 12 this year. Observed since 1958, the week highlights the value that libraries, or if you prefer learning resource centers, play in American lives and communities.

Paradoxically, the IMLS was established in 1996 by a Republican-led Congress and has a mission to, "advance, support, and empower America's museums, libraries, and related organizations through grantmaking, research, and policy development."

Imagine what Waukegan's favorite literary son Ray Bradbury would have become if not for the Carnegie Library in the city's downtown. He was a frequent visitor at the edifice at Sheridan Road and Washington Street, gleaned much of his writing flair from the shelves of hardbounds the library offered him as a youngster. Despite modernization and the advent of electronic materials, there are future Ray Bradburys currently wandering the stacks of their neighborhood libraries.

Certainly, everyone supports responsible government spending and the reduction of duplicative and unnecessary bureaucracy. However, librarians and patrons across the U.S. see the IMLS as a model federal agency that delivers exceptional value to more than 1.2 billion in-person patron visits annually, according to one estimate.

"President Trump's executive order to eliminate the IMLS might save a tiny fraction of the federal budget, but the costs to our communities would be enormous," Ryan Livergood, executive director of the Warren-Newport Library in Gurnee, said in a statement. "IMLS funding is targeted where it's needed most, especially in underserved communities. Libraries have an amazing track record of maximizing taxpayer dollars."

Livergood notes that without IMLS funding, rural libraries may lose their ability to provide internet services to communities with no other options; smaller libraries won't be able to afford digital collections like e-books and audiobooks; and library staffers will lose their jobs, further reducing services.

"Libraries are the institutions in our community that keep our democracy running," he said. "The time to support them is now, before we lose an investment that pays dividends far beyond its modest cost."

"You would be hard-pressed to find a government agency that makes taxpayer dollars go further than your local library," Livergood added, "and libraries accomplish all this with far less funding than other government entities. Taking more funds away from them isn't just unfair, it's shortsighted."

The American Library Association feels the same. In a statement, the group condemned, "eliminating the only federal agency dedicated to funding library services. The Trump administration's executive order is cutting off at the knees the most beloved and trusted of American institutions and the staff and services they offer."

Trump, however, is adamant that he wants the agency dismantled, “to the maximum extent of the law.” Since taking office, the president has ordered nearly a dozen agencies, including the Consumer Finance Protection Bureau, the U.S. Agency for International Development and the U.S. Institute of Peace, shuttered or their operations drastically curtailed, according to The Associated Press.

Belt-tightening at the federal level certainly is long overdue. Yet targeting something as basic as library funding seems draconian at best.

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