

ALA American Library Association

April 29, 2009

To the Members of the West Bend Common Council:

I am writing to express our concerns about the West Bend Common Council's recent decision to deny reappointment to four West Bend Community Memorial Library Board members. We understand that the Council voted on April 21, 2009 to remove these Library Board members, based on objections to their "ideology" and the four library board members' apparent decision to adhere to library policies concerning challenges to books and materials in the library's collection.

We encourage the Council to reconsider its decision to deny reappointment to the four Library Board members, who, we understand, are well-qualified volunteers with a long history of commendable public service.

Because the public library must serve all members of the community—not only the most powerful, the most vocal, or even the majority—Library Board members have an obligation to distinguish between their personal beliefs and the need to support the public library's mission. The library is a community resource that provides access to a full range of information and ideas for the community as a whole. The Library Board's decision to abide by and uphold the library's policies concerning challenges to library materials reflects their fulfillment of this obligation.

Such policies establish a framework for registering a complaint, provide for a hearing, and protect the principles of freedom of information, individuals' First Amendment right to access library materials, and the professional responsibility and integrity of the library staff. Reliance on such policies prevents anyone from subjectively blocking all library users from access to materials simply because he or she does not like their content or has a particular moral or religious objection to materials that others in the community may value or need.

Similarly, as an elected body with the responsibility to serve all members of the community, the Common Council has an obligation to distinguish between personal beliefs and the preservation of the public library's duty to represent the diversity of people, opinions, and ideas found in West Bend, Wisconsin. First Amendment values are not open to popular vote, and library collections should not be governed by those with the loudest voices or even a simple majority. We respectfully urge you to reconsider the Council's decision, and vote to reappoint Tom Fitz, Mary Reilly-Kliss, James Poulos, and Nick Dobberstein to the West Bend Community Library Board.

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We are also deeply concerned about the ongoing campaign that seeks to restrict access to books in the West Bend Community Library's young adult collection. We understand that a citizens' group has claimed that many works in the young adult collection are "pornographic" and has expressed objections to certain materials in the library's collection of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender fiction and nonfiction for young adult readers.

Though individuals and groups are entitled to their opinion about these books, none of the works identified by this organization are "pornographic" or legally obscene for youth or adults. Instead, they are works of literature and nonfiction that are well-reviewed and recommended for older youth and adolescent readers. While some of the topics they address may be sensitive or difficult for some families, other families find these books to be valuable resources. Any effort or policy that aims to restrict access to these books by removing them to the adult collection, labeling them as "harmful" books, or otherwise preventing youth from reading them because of a particular person's partisan or doctrinal disapproval is a form of censorship that may rise to a First Amendment violation.

The works in question, like many books, may not be right for every user of the West Bend Community Memorial Library. But the library has a responsibility to represent a broad range of views in its collection and to meet the information needs of everyone in the community it serves. Though a parent may feel that a particular book is inappropriate for their child, that title may be a treasured favorite or a needed resource for another family. We firmly support the right of library users to voice their concerns and select different materials for themselves and their children, but those objecting to particular books should not be given the power to restrict other users' rights of access to the material.

We appreciate the outpouring of community involvement and engagement with the library that is represented by the efforts of several citizens and citizens' groups to express their opinions on either side of this issue. We are concerned, however, that fear and misinformation are driving efforts to restrict access to the materials in question. Public libraries are not preschools, but community institutions that serve persons of all ages and of all political and religious persuasions. Library collections should reflect this diversity, rather than limiting everyone's reading to materials suitable for a five year old.

We applaud the librarians and the library board of the West Bend Community Memorial Library, who serve their community by selecting and making available a broad range of materials to meet user wants and needs, without shying away from potentially controversial subjects. In doing so, these committed professionals protect and defend intellectual freedom and the right of each user to choose the best material for themselves and their family.

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The library is a symbol of our most cherished freedom as Americans—the freedom to speak our minds and to hear what others have to say. We urge you to reaffirm the importance and value of the freedom to read, by supporting the librarians and library board of the West Bend Community Library and by standing by the members of your community, who have the right to choose for themselves what they will read, view, or hear.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Deborah A. Caldwell-Stone
Acting Director
Office for Intellectual Freedom

cc:

Mayor Kristine Deiss
West Bend Community Library Board
Michael Tyree, Director, West Bend Community Library
West Bend Daily News