



In response to public outcry regarding Yancey County Commissioners' Meeting on Monday, August 14, provided by AMY Regional Library Director Amber Westall Briggs

* Note: Amber Westall Briggs was not present at this meeting.

The Yancey County Board of Commissioners met on Monday, August 14, for their regular monthly meeting. The agenda for this meeting was posted 4 days prior and only accessible on local news outlet WKYK/WTOE, not on the Yancey County government website. One item on the meeting agenda that was specific to the library simply stated, “Library Board Appointments” with no names listed, as is common practice. Our library system and board assumed these to be the appointments that have been overlooked for over a year by county government.

Regional Library Director Amber Westall Briggs was not informed of any plans by Commissioners to address any business regarding the Yancey County Public Library. The lack of communication by county government has made it challenging to know what direction forward the Yancey County Public Library Advisory Board is to take. Are these board members being ignored or removed from service?

It has been ‘customary’ or ‘common practice’ for local advisory board members across the regional system to serve multiple terms as advisory board members. This common practice was implemented prior to the current Director’s hiring and was in place prior to her predecessor. The first time it has been questioned by Yancey County government was in June 2023, shortly after complaints Commissioners received regarding the LGBTQ pride display at Yancey County Public Library.

The local advisory boards nor the Director of the AMY Regional Library System are opposed to adhering to term limits, however what we would propose is that Yancey County government would allow the current board members serving on Yancey County Public Library Advisory Board to finish out their terms and then rotate off the local board. The board still has two vacancies, and these vacancies were shared with county government over a year ago.

The local library board is not opposed to taking into consideration recommendations by the Yancey County Commissioners for these board vacancies. In the other 3 advisory boards in the library system, local government works directly with the board chair in discussing recommendations and then selection of local board members. As such, all local advisory boards and the governing board in the regional system are bipartisan boards, serving the good of the library and the communities they represent. The Regional Library Director has nothing to do with selection and appointment of board members and is only responsible for submitting paperwork regarding vacancies and appointment recommendations from local boards.

The Yancey County Commissioners on Monday, August 14 *selected* and appointed 3 regional library board members. According to Section 1. Election and Tenure of the Yancey County Public Library By-Laws:

In the case of vacancy, the Board shall, at the next regular meeting, select a member to fill the unexpired term. Vacancies in office may be filled by the remaining members of the Board of Trustees voting thereon by ballot or by voice at the discretion of the Board.

“The Board” referred to in Section 1 is the Yancey County Public Library Board, not the Board of Commissioners. Therefore, any attempt by the Yancey County Commissioners to select library board members conflicts with the Yancey County Public Library By-Laws.

The Yancey County Commissioners appointed 3 individuals to the Regional Board. The 10-year Contractual Agreement signed by the Commission in 2021 states that Regional Board members are appointed from existing local advisory board members. One of the board members selected and appointed by the Commission is a County Commissioner, and that person can only serve in an Ex Officio (non-voting) capacity on the local advisory board (this was recommended by the Library Director at the public library meeting in July). A seated Commissioner cannot serve on the AMY Regional Library Board, as that would be a conflict of interest.

Commission Chairman Whitson stated local advisory library board bylaws would be changed. Article VIII of the Yancey County Board By-Laws state:

The Constitution and By-Laws may be amended by three-fourths (3/4) of the members present at any regular Library Board meeting that has a quorum present, provided that the amendment was stated in the call for the meeting, which was mailed to the members at least ten (10) days before the meeting.

Based on an audio recording of the meeting, Chairman Whitson stated “The library is to provide resources only and should not show bias of any kind – political, religious, ethnic, gender, etc. No displays with bias of any kind. No pornography including ‘cartoons.’” This statement is in direct contrast with the July meeting held at Yancey County Public Library in which Chairman Whitson said, “We agree with everything you are doing with the library.”

Firstly, pornography does not exist in public libraries. Pornographic materials are illegal for public libraries to purchase.

Public libraries display materials. Bias as referred to by Chairman Whitson is undefined, however, the AMY Regional Library System adheres to this policy:

Public libraries are recognized as legal public forums in the communities they serve. As part of a free society, the regional library system will provide access to information in all fields and from all points of view. The regional library system, the governing regional library board of trustees, and the library staff will not, either directly or indirectly, ban or censor any materials. The presence of an item in the public library does not indicate any endorsement of its contents by the Avery-Mitchell-Yancey Regional Library System.

The regional library system holds censorship to be a purely individual matter and declares that-while anyone is free to reject for himself books and other materials of which he does not approve-he/she cannot exercise this right of censorship to restrict the freedom of others.

If a resident in Avery, Mitchell or Yancey counties would like the Director to reconsider materials, there is a reconsideration request form in hardcopy at all of our library locations and in digital form on the AMY website. All library staff refer patrons to this document when a patron questions material selection. To date, over the past 9 years, there has been one reconsideration request form submitted to the Director, and that form was rescinded by the patron shortly after submission.

Chairman Whitson advised the audience that they should be concerned about how their tax dollars should be spent. All financial reports are provided to local governments in all 3 counties by the AMY Chief Financial Officer. The annual budget for each library is submitted for signature by county or town government, after adoption by each local advisory board.

Challenges such as these can often be avoided by transparent communication. The AMY Regional Library System and the Regional Director continue to be available for any communication Yancey County government would like to provide. It is this Director's opinion that both entities have legal counsel present for further discussion.

See you all in September at the next Yancey County Commissioner Meeting. Stand up, speak out, this is YOUR public library.

In humble service to this regional community, ALL of this community,

Amber Westall Briggs, MLS