



Public Statement from the AMY Regional Library Director Amber Westall Briggs

Yancey County government submitted a letter on July 1, 2024 to the State Library, regional board members, and town and counties that make up the regional library system that they are withdrawing from the regional system. This means the Yancey County government is in their “demonstration year” as Yancey County Public Library, except we still operate as AMY Regional Library until July 1, 2025. I know many of you have asked me to respond, to give insight, but my intention was to wait until County Manager Lynn Austin had the same information from the State Library as I have had. She has that now.

This past year has been a heartache, psychologically draining, and highly stressful for the employees of the AMY Regional Library System, and particularly, the employees at Yancey County Public Library. The employees at Yancey have been harassed, called pedophiles and groomers, all because of a book display. Think about that. They did nothing but the work of library employees who know the foundation of the library—to serve the people, all of the people, without personal bias or personal beliefs and highlight books by members of marginalized groups, including LGBTQ. Now, bring us to this year, where policy states “no flags, no decorations, only minimal signage and book displays to be in appropriate areas,” such as the PRIDE display in the adult fiction area. Accommodation. Compromise. Listening. We did our part.

This past year has been a tremendous gain from a financial perspective, because for the first time in 20+ years, regional library systems were given a recurring increase in State Aid. We are so well equipped to serve our communities, and that was made possible by directors across the state who serve on those committees, me included, and our representatives at the state level listened to and awarded funding. Why withdraw now? Why pay for what the State already provides?

I work with the best people, kind and giving, dedicated to competent service above self and to the adults and children they serve. To hear that the Yancey County commissioners decided to withdraw is heartbreaking to us. We had tumultuous board meetings the entire year with the Yancey County board, whose Chair, in her own words at our last regional board meeting stated she was here because of the displays. Is that the criteria for a library board member these days? Being a library board member is about advocacy for the library, supporting employees, and discussing ways to better the library to serve the entire community. In all my years of serving on local boards, regional boards, and state boards, I’ve never witnessed such nastiness and ill-will from board members. Disparaging staff and the library as board members are generally grounds for dismissal from a board, but the commissioners who appointed them were silent.

When I think about Yancey County Public Library, I think about what we all did to make it the library it is now, and yes, I was there too, in the beginning, with my children, carrying bricks and books to the new location, along with people like Dottie Buker, Jody Higgins, and some of the greatest Friends of the Library, patrons, and citizens I have had the pleasure to meet. I performed collection development with James Byrd and Melanie Stallings. We stood in the light of previous directors like Dr. Dan Barron and Theresa Coletta. We were thrilled and overjoyed with the opportunity for such a location, such an opportunity, and do you know who helped make that happen? Yancey County commissioners, citizens, individual donors, grants written by regional staff, and behind it all, the AMY Regional Library, the regional connector. So, I want you to know, when you hear Chairman Jeff

Whitson talk about preserving Appalachian culture or Yancey County history, AMY Regional Library is Yancey County's history. What the people will lose if this withdrawal takes place:

- Children's Services
- Bookmobile and Outreach
- Digital Services Librarian
- Programming provided by State Aid
- Materials
- Technology
- Overdrive (better known as Libby, the application and resource for eBooks and audiobooks)
- Expertise in collection development and cataloging
- Grant-writing experience
- Region-wide partnerships
- Regional funding from foundations

What you lose are the people, and anyone who knows anything about a thriving organization, of which we are, you lose us, the local staff and regional staff, a regional system of employees encompassing 3 counties, and you lose board members across a region who have expertise and heart for community. That's what you lose, the greatest loss of all.

How many mountain folks can tell the story of the AMY Regional Bookmobile visiting their home? The Bookmobile is vital to our history and to the people.

Regional library systems work best when the counties that make up that system are comparable in economics and population. AMY Regional Library System is an example of that best system. Our resources, county & town funding, and personnel are a pool of shared resources serving a region, and State Aid to support that system is dependent on that collaboration. If Yancey County does withdraw and know they can change their mind any time within this fiscal year, our State Aid funding to the regional system will decline in the future years (document attached).

Withdrawing goes against what it is to work with neighboring counties, because it will change how funding affects Avery, Mitchell, and Spruce Pine. So, I ask you, commissioners, why? What is the gain? I can't see the future, but the devil is in the details. When you take an oath as commissioner, you agree to uphold the Constitution, you agree to work in good faith for the betterment of your county. I'll wager commissioners have political pressure, but that is secondary to the will of the people, because you serve the entire county, that is your oath. The same was asked of Yancey County Board Members appointed to the Regional Board when they were asked to sign an ethics statement, to which they each declined. Details matter. Can Yancey County fund a library? I don't know. Can they apply for State Aid and be a member partner with Cardinal? Maybe, if they are willing to put in the work to qualify. Will it be the library you know and love? No. Because if commissioners want to change collection development and access to materials, which they have said they do, that is censorship. A library founded by that foundation can never be what we protected as a library that gives access to all.

Based on the evidence of this past year, what you have done, commissioners, is acquiesced to vile and baseless accusations by individuals, several of whom were appointed to the library boards,

who have no interest in the public library, except to perpetuate falsehoods. To be fair, you bear the responsibility of appointing several board members who didn't use the library, who never advocated for the library, and who still don't advocate for the library.

The reality is, there's always an opportunity to right a wrong, but that takes courage. Acknowledging this withdrawal serves no-one but a small group of loud voices, who place personal belief systems above the constitutional right to access is a hard ask, but you could do it. You could surprise us all and change a decision that is both fiscally irresponsible and unnecessary. Would I work with you? Would we do our best to right a wrong? Of course. I have always been willing and accommodating. My door is always open.

I am proud to represent this system, these employees, and the boards of trustees who met and read the policies and procedures and attempted to find a solution, rather than limit the rights of patrons to have access to materials and displays. These board members gathered around tables at individual libraries and discussed as respectable adults. Their responsibility was to an institution and the Constitution, rather than to a small group of loud voices. We made concessions, we changed policies, we listened, and we made appropriate changes. What concessions have the commissioners made, but to appoint individuals with personal belief agendas?

I have been told I cannot report to the Yancey County Commission in August or September, but there is room for my report in October. I will be there. Understand that County Manager Lynn Austin has been professional. We have communicated this past year throughout these processes. It is my common practice to work with county and town managers, to communicate regularly, and to invite them to participate in the process. I was shocked to hear of the withdrawal, because I felt we were working together. It did not fit with what compromises the commissioners knew our boards had made in this past year.

If Yancey County withdraws from the regional system, County Manager Lynn Austin and I will continue to work together and do the jobs we are asked to perform. It won't be easy. This process will not be seamless, as much as we will try to make that happen. Yancey County Public Library has over 31,000 materials, with the vast majority purchased by regional funds, and much of the technology was purchased with regional funds or regional grants. Yancey County government has never had a budgetary line item for materials. We will have to spend a lot of time this year doing inventory, which is why I can't give you the loss in dollars for materials and technology, because we just don't know yet. We will make certain that materials and technology purchased with regional funds are reallocated to the existing libraries within the regional system, per the interlocal agreement. We will be spending a lot of time re-barcoding, rearranging, and then still trying to make sure Yancey patrons have access. Again, why? What is the gain to the people of Yancey County?

Yancey County Public Library, existing as a public library funded by a county, will be the only county in North Carolina of its population size to do so. It will be one of two libraries in the state of North Carolina to support one single branch.

I continue to hear Chairman Jeff Whitson's words from last July regarding his intentions to investigate leaving the regional library system: "We have since found out that it is impossible for us to do so." What changed? The people deserve an answer. What I imagine is that you can't give it,

because it is discriminatory in nature. If I'm wrong, correct me. I am just as much in the dark as the people of this region.

To the patrons and citizens of Yancey County, we love working for this community, and we will continue to do so to the best of our ability. Our libraries are thriving, and those of you who come out and use the library, support our programming, and share your thoughts and ideas, even when you disagree, you are the reason this work is worth every bit of our efforts.