

Ohio libraries prepare to battle state and federal funding cuts

By Anna Staver
Cleveland.com

COLUMBUS, Ohio - Ohio's libraries are fighting a Republican plan to change the state's nearly century-old funding model, warning that millions of dollars and beloved programs are at stake.

They say that funding model helped create a statewide network of both large and small libraries that rank among the best in the country.

"Ohio is looked to as the example of what libraries should be doing and how they should collaborate," Ohio Library Council Director Michelle Francis said. "Under the House version of the budget, there's a serious concern that collaboration is at risk."

The Ohio House GOP's two-year budget proposal would:

- End the longstanding practice of giving libraries a percentage of total state tax revenue and replace it with a set amount. Now, they receive 1.7%.
- In fiscal year 2026, the defined amount would be \$485 million -- less than the roughly \$495-500 million expected this year, according to data from the Ohio Office of Budget and Management.

The move could shift the burden to local taxpayers, and their property taxes. State lawmakers are debating how to address an explosion in local property taxes, but taking away state funding could send more libraries to the ballot.

Libraries throughout Ohio and their backers urged patrons to contact their elected representatives. Banners on websites, emails and social media posts urged lawmakers to stop this plan.

The Cuyahoga County Public Library even [assembled its own form](#) for supporters to contact their representatives in the Statehouse.

They warned that Cuyahoga County is among those at greatest risk. The county has nine library systems, and they said they are facing multimillion dollar losses.

“I had a call from a library director this morning who was saying they are looking at closing branches,” Francis said. “This is real.”

The House Republican plan came at a difficult time for libraries nationally. In March, the Trump administration slashed funding for the [Institute of Museum and Library Services](#), the primary source for federal library funding.

“It’s a little bit like a punch in the gut,” Columbiana Public Library Director Kathy Bennett said.

The 90-year shift

Ohio has been funding libraries through state taxes since 1933.

The system evolved over the decades, from a tax on stocks and bonds to a share of income tax revenue, until lawmakers settled on the current model: 1.7% of total state tax revenue divided among counties based on population.

Gov. Mike DeWine’s budget would raise the percentage to 1.75%. That increase would give libraries about \$1.08 billion over the next two fiscal years.

House Republicans, on the other hand, want that amount to be around \$980 million over the two-year budget cycle. That works out to about what libraries got in fiscal 2024 but less than they’re getting in the 2025 fiscal year that ends June 30.

But perhaps more importantly, at least for librarians, is the proposed shift from that percentage of all state taxes. The House budget converts state library funding to a fixed amount.

The move would leave libraries subject to the political whims of the Ohio General Assembly during every two-year budget cycle.

“I don’t think Ohioans really know how much we spend on libraries,” state Rep. Brian Stewart, a Circleville Republican, told reporters. “This just provides some transparency.”

Lawmakers should decide, Stewart continued, “what is the actual amount of money we believe should be spent here rather than this spending on autopilot that we have now.”

Stewart pointed out during hearings in the House Finance Committee he chairs that Ohio doesn't have as much money as it did during the pandemic when billions in federal COVID dollars flowed in.

"These are not the budgets we've had for the last four years," Stewart told reporters.

The House budget proposal -- unlike DeWine's -- doesn't raise taxes, so tough decisions are necessary. Stewart asked what programs Ohio should cut or how much the state should raise taxes.

Librarians say they've had their fair share of spending cuts.

In 2001, [Ohio provided libraries](#) \$496 million. The House proposal for FY 2026 is \$485 million.

"We haven't kept up with inflation," Francis said. She estimated Ohio would owe libraries \$690 million if it had.

"I will tell you it was really devastating news for many of our members," Francis added. "Closing branches. Reducing hours. These are real conversations our members have started to have in the last 48 hours."

OLC estimates 39 counties would see a reduction in funds starting July 1 under the House plan. Here are the top four:

- Hamilton County 29%
- Cuyahoga County 24%
- Harrison County 19%
- Jefferson 15%

"Libraries have come a long way from places where you grab a book," Bennett said. "Libraries are the hubs of rural communities."

Columbiana, for instance, has an all abilities club for those with disabilities and a tech tutor who also teaches classes and helps seniors attend telehealth appointments. It has 3D printing classes. The library covered the cost for tutoring 1,000 students.

Bennett said Columbiana just celebrated an expansion, which created new rooms for tutoring, teach classes and seniors.

"I am not sure what we're going to do now because we have this building and we might not have the funds to run things."

Rethinking federal library funding

The Institute of Museum and Library Services staff (the federal agency that funds libraries and museums) was put on leave at the end of March.

They were sent home in response to President Donald Trump's [executive order](#) earlier that month to shrink a number of different agencies.

"We had to pause the distribution of our summer reading grants," said Mandy Knapp, the head librarian for the State Library of Ohio.

Knapp had approved 51 grants, including one going to the Cuyahoga County Library to help children learning English get ready for kindergarten.

"It's not clear to me how our funds will be distributed if there is no staff to release them," she said.

The State Library of Ohio gets about \$5.4 million from IMLS and a lot of those dollars go to local libraries through grants.

The rest go to statewide services like the Talking Book program, which serves Ohio's blind and physically disabled residents.

Knapp got an email this week from a woman thanking her for the talking book program because it's allowed her to read the Bible with her mother again.

"These are services I think everyday Americans can agree on," Knapp said.

The state library doesn't directly rely on the percentage of state tax revenue that local libraries receive, but some local libraries use it to cover fees for Knapp's book sharing program.

[OhioLINK](#) can ship a book from Cincinnati to a student at Cleveland State University.

"I feel like each library purchases books that fit the needs of the community," Bennett said. "An inner city library would have totally different patrons than that ones that come to my library. We have a lot of large print. But that's the beauty of having that system in place."

Anyone can get access to books from anywhere in Ohio.

Ohio's library legacy

That's the whole point, according to former Democratic Gov. Dick Celeste.

"If you go to the library in Dover, Ohio, we wanted it to be excellent in the same way the library in Cleveland or Columbus is," he said.

Celeste led the charge in 1983 to use income taxes to fund libraries and by fiscal year 2022, Ohio led the nation in per-capita state funding of public libraries, according to the Legislative Services Commission.

"We have the best library system in the nation as far as being able to move materials around and get people what they need," Alexandria Public Library Director Carrie Strong said.

The small, rural Licking County library offers two 3D printers, a Cricut machine, and robotics kits for kids. Patrons can download e-books or request physical copies from libraries across Ohio. The school district even borrows extra copies for book clubs.

It's also [one of 48 libraries](#) (out of 251 in Ohio) that depends entirely on state funding and federal grants. The library in Alexandria doesn't have a local levy. Strong already is thinking of how the library will have to limit services if funding is cut.

The budget still has months of work ahead. The Senate began informal hearings last week. Both chambers will have to compromise on a plan before sending it to DeWine for his signature this summer.