Public libraries win: state lawmakers backpedal on funding cuts in budget bill

By Laura A. Bischoff
Columbus Dispatch

State lawmakers on Tuesday reversed course on proposed cuts to public library funding and promised that every library will see an increase in money next year.

Ohio House Finance Chairman Brian Stewart, R-Ashville, said the Public Library Fund will continue but that lawmakers will decide how much money to put into it, rather than funnel a set percentage of the state's general revenues into the library fund.

Hundreds of librarians from across Ohio on Tuesday lobbied lawmakers and Gov. Mike DeWine to protect state money for local libraries.

Lawmakers in the Ohio House had floated the idea of eliminating the Public Library Fund and giving the libraries less money than what DeWine proposed and less than the libraries expect to receive this year.

DeWine, a long-time library supporter and politico, gave advice to the librarians for their lobbying day at the statehouse.

"There is nothing stronger than that personal relationship. We all react to people, and we react to stories. Statistics are interesting. Stories are people," DeWine said. "Talk to your own legislator and talk to them about what you see out there every day."

The House is scheduled to vote on the two-year state budget on Wednesday. The Senate will then consider the bill. Eventually, the two chambers will reach a compromise version to send to DeWine.

Former Ohio governor Richard Celeste said he helped create what would eventually be called the Public Library Fund to provide a permanent money source.

In 1983, Ohio set up the fund and agreed on a formula to make sure smaller libraries received support.

"I don't think there are many places where Ohio ranks number one in the nation. The library system is one of them," he said recently. "I think it's worthwhile to maintain that. You know, when you're trading money for debt service on a $600 million domed stadium versus something like this, I mean, it's rotten priorities."