

MEMORANDUM

TO: North Dakota Library Association
FROM: Jason Matthews – JM Strategies, LLC
DATE: December 22, 2019
SUBJECT: Review of 2019 North Dakota Legislative Session



The 2019 legislative session was much calmer compared to the 2015 and 2017 legislative sessions. We entered the 2019 session with the following five key priorities...

- Support of Governor Burgum's proposed budget for the State Library.
- Continued state aid to public libraries and State Aid Distribution Fund (Monies via city governments, which includes funding for public libraries).
- Support for Library Vision dollars via the North Dakota State Library budget.
- Ongoing support for funding for academic libraries through the Open Education Resources (OER) initiative.
- When appropriate – and not to the detriment of State Library funding or State Aid – measured opposition to proposals limiting local governments' ability to fund libraries and other services.

Our Challenge: Justifying State Funding

Our major challenge – as it was for other advocacy groups – was the crafting of the state's budget. This year, the North Dakota Legislature created a budget without much, if any, consideration of Governor Burgum's budget. As a result, state agencies, such as the State Library, had to justify their budget requests.

While this was the new reality within the legislature, NDLA's approach remained consistent with past sessions. We provided messaging assistance to librarians and appealed for them to contact their state legislators. But what was different this year was the number of action alerts we distributed.

Whereas in years past, we averaged eight action alerts, this year's session saw only a handful. Our first – and most important – legislative action alert was sent out on February 12 with a call to action in support of Senate Bill (SB) 2013, which related to funding for the State Library, State Aid to public libraries, and grant funding through the North Dakota Coordinating Council (NDLCC). A letter/email template was developed and provided to NDLA members to assist them in crafting unique and personalized messages to legislators. The letters and emails received were highlighted in State Librarian Mary Soucie's testimony before the Legislature.

Our Approach: Keeping Our Heads Down

As always, NDLA's 'Day at the Capitol' provided librarians with an opportunity to highlight the essential work and value of our libraries. But, aside from state funding, there were no major issues that elicited significant concern and required major member mobilization. Once funding was secure, we opted to keep our heads down as to not draw any unnecessary attention and ride out the remainder of the legislative session.

Looking Ahead to the 2021 Session

Barring anything unforeseen, the political landscape will be much the same in the 2021 session. Governor Burgum will be re-elected to a second term and Republicans will maintain super-majority control of the Legislature. However, I do anticipate some fallout from the recent audit of the State Library, which may impact state funding. However, we can take solace in knowing that:

- 1) The State Library is not alone among state agencies whose funding will come under legislative scrutiny;
- 2) the State Auditor's actions have not been popular with some legislators; and
- 3) the State Library audit's findings were minor innocent mistakes that pale in comparison to the audit findings of other state agencies.

Still, it is prudent for NDLA to develop an appropriate strategy and message to contend with this matter.

Setting aside the State Library audit, I recommend we plan for the 2021 session by adhering to the following positive-negative messaging framework I proposed back in January of this year.

POSITIVE FRAMEWORK: Opportunity-Solution-Hero

- **Opportunities Libraries Offer:** North Dakota's libraries are providing opportunities that meet...
 - The needs of a well-trained workforce through specialized assistance to those in search of employment and programs that provide special training for essential skills;
 - The technological and information needs of communities through providing unbiased, factual information and free access to computers and the World Wide Web;
 - The cultural and educational needs of our communities by serving as the heart of a community's quality of life and place – connecting residents through programs and gathering places.
- **Solutions Libraries Provide:** Through technology and trained professionals, North Dakota's libraries are providing essential services that meet the cultural, economic, and educational needs of our communities. *Libraries should specifically cite examples of what they offer that meets this criterion.*
- **Hero:** The hero of NDLA's messaging is always North Dakota's libraries and librarians.

NEGATIVE FRAMEWORK: Threat-Villain-Victim

- **Threat to Libraries:** Decreased funding threatens the services libraries provide and diminishes the quality of life and place so essential to communities.
- **Villain:** Generally speaking, the villain are budget cuts as opposed to – *and this is very important* – legislators who want to impose such cuts.
- **Victims:** General victim is the community a library serves; specific victims are patrons, children/students, those looking for employment, senior citizens, etc.

This framework can serve NDLA well and, in the interim, help the association frame its approach to the next legislative session.