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Helena, Montana

February 10, 2022

Friends and colleagues,

Tomorrow I will resign my position as a Montana State Library (MSL) commissioner. My term runs through May 2022. I had applied for reappointment, but the recent alarming and heartbreaking events in the Flathead have, indirectly, made this a good time for me to step aside. That's the short version. I hope you will read further and allow me to explain fully. Note, here I am speaking solely for myself.

### **What Was ImagineIF's Secret Sauce?**

To tell the full story, I need to begin several years ago when Kim Crowley was still ImagineIF's director. As a MSL commissioner I couldn't help but notice that ImagineIF had a very long run of great programs, that it has perennially played a trusted and highly valued role in Flathead communities, and that it punched way above its weight. As an OCLC trustee I frequently used ImagineIF as an example of how a great public library could serve its community's needs, regardless of its size and situation, when it had the right and affordable tools and resources to get the job done.

In February of 2018 I made an appointment with Kim to visit and see if I could discover ImagineIF's secret sauce. Why was ImagineIF consistently such a great library? Clearly it wasn't due to their aging, inadequate buildings. Their budget was insufficient to their mission. They were perennially short staffed. So how did they do it?

During our visit I came to realize that ImagineIF's secret was trust. Trust between staff members. Trust between staff and the library's award-winning board members. Trust between the library and its funding body. And most importantly, trust between the library and its community. Trust on all those levels allowed ImagineIF to operate with excellence for decades. Through successive improvement it became (literally) a world-class public library. It hired and retained fantastic directors. It was blessed with an extraordinary staff. It had a vibrant Friends group and an enviable Foundation. And as you'd expect, ImagineIF always had a great library board, one that played its role with fidelity, imagination, and courage.

### **Great Libraries Have Great Boards**

In my forty-plus years of working with public libraries, I have never seen a great library that didn't have a great library board. A seriously great library board understands the value and importance of a great public library. A great board's trust, support, and wisdom nurtures its staff, honors its community's diversity, respects everyone's privacy, and appreciates their library's power to transform lives. A great library board understands its library's inclusive role in an evolving, diverse, democratic society. A great board ceaselessly advocates for their fabulous yet ever-improving library.

Librarians' and library boards' voices are powerful, as befits their consequential mission. Their libraries are trusted to bring all the world's stories to their communities, and to help community members discover and weave their own stories into the world's tapestry of stories. Great library boards use their power, through an abundance of resources and services, to provide sufficiently for everyone's needs.

I've been a studious observer of library boards for over four decades. During the last fifteen years I've been a board member myself. I recently read that trust is accrued in teaspoons, but lost in buckets. While there are clearly differences in perspective among ImagineIF board members, and I don't wish to assign individual blame, but I am heartbroken at how rapidly the ImagineIF board, as a whole, has lost the trust it enjoyed for decades.

### **Why I Am Resigning From the Commission**

When my wife Sue and I learned that the Flathead County Library Alliance, a recently formed library advocacy group, was seeking funds to help advocate for ImagineIF, we felt we had to donate to their cause. The Alliance is speaking up for twenty-first century library services, something that Sue and I passionately believe in. As you may know, we have a daughter who until recently served on the ImagineIF team. Our concerns would be the same, our actions identical, if she had not been employed at ImagineIF. I fear that the retreat from basic library values, recently demonstrated by the ImagineIF board, could spread to other Montana libraries.

As a MSL commissioner I am trusted to fairly, knowledgeably, and impartially act in accordance to every Montanan's best library-related interests. I am charged with being at once an advocate for strong local libraries, and if called upon to rule in a dispute, to be an unbiased judge of rule and policy.

Recent events show ImagineIF's board turning its back on diversity, rejecting the right to read as a defining principle, dismissing the need for professional and trained librarians, and unraveling decades of their library's many successes. In sum, the ImagineIF board's actions are unwise and profoundly antithetical to several centuries of bedrock library practices and values. They are narrowing the promise of public libraries by throttling curiosity, discouraging inquiry, and limiting learning. Curiosity, inquiry, and learning are the roots of any functioning participatory democracy, and part of every Montanans' birthright.

Conflict of interest is said to be the appearance, to a fair-minded person, of having personal interests compromise professional judgement. To date, regarding ImagineIF, there has been no occasion for my judgement to be either in appearance or in fact compromised. The MSL Commission may be called to address the situation in Flathead County. I don't want to be an impediment to MSL's neutral, helpful role in getting ImagineIF back on track. To avoid compromising the State Library's ability when called upon to assist ImagineIF, it's best that I step aside.

For the majority of my career in Montana libraries I've watched Montanans champion fair library access for their entire community. Recently, however, some in our communities have been working hard to narrow the scope of our collections, starve our budgets, limit our programs, discriminate in library hiring, and in the end, cause our libraries to limit services to a fraction of our communities.

It is our duty and within our power as librarians and library boards to advocate for sufficient library services for everyone. It is our duty to tell libraries' stories with clarity and purpose, so that our libraries are adequately and sustainably funded—sufficiently funded so that we can equitably offer high-quality library content and services to all we serve.

As we've seen in the Flathead this loss of trust between a library board and its community is always a danger, so long as librarians and library boards neglect to celebrate libraries' value to our communities. It's time we speak up for libraries.

## **How Libraries Get Great (Hint: Trust is vital; It also takes money)**

Great twenty-first century libraries embrace our networked, diverse world with networked, diverse materials and services. Great libraries respect everyone's dignity, offering a safe place to be curious and preparing fertile ground for learning. A great library offers its users library materials and services sufficient to meet everyone in its community's needs. Twenty-first century communities rely upon great twenty-first century libraries.

I hope that Montana's library community will continue to work to obtain sufficient funding to meet all Montanans' needs. Specifically, I encourage the library community to look at the reauthorization for funding Direct State Aid for Public Libraries (MCA 22-1-326–329). Authorization for funding of State Aid funding expires in June 2023 and will need to be renewed in our next legislative session.

Let's fully fund shared statewide services and make them available to all Montana communities. Let's improve library services to all Montanans, through the many types of libraries they use: academic, public, school, special, and tribal. Let's use statewide funds to support statewide ventures, including meeting the demand for e-books, helping smaller libraries with a statewide IT help desk and with traveling IT engineers. Let's fund floating collections of high-demand books, requested through a Montana Shared Catalog Partner-like relationship between all Montana libraries, and moved by a courier service that serves each and every Montana library.

This is a vision of what a newly imagined State Aid to Libraries could look like, one that provides every Montanan the library resources they need to navigate this networked world. Currently State Aid amounts annually to \$433,690, which is \$0.40 per capita. This helps some public libraries pay their share of Montana Library2Go, the Shared Catalog, or their OCLC membership. A fully funded State Aid, for all Montana Libraries, might cost \$5.00 or more per capita. I challenge Montana libraries, and the Montana Library Association, to obtain sufficient funding to abundantly serve their users.

### **Thank You**

Thank you for your trust and the good times we've shared. I have been honored to serve you as a colleague, as Montana Library Network's director, and as a State Library commissioner.

It's been an honor to work with my colleagues on the Commission and with Jennie and the crew at the State Library. We have a spectacularly capable State Librarian and a terrific staff.

Montana State Library continues to play a vital role in Montana, serving Montanans by working cooperatively, locally and statewide, working with other Montana libraries and partners as they build modern Montana communities. If you know of someone who would be a great State Library commissioner, please encourage them to apply to Governor Gianforte to become a MSL commissioner. It's important work, and it's a great gig.

I trust the State Library Commission will continue to faithfully pursue its mission of helping all organizations, communities, and Montanans thrive through excellent library resources and services. I know that its commissioners and staff will continue to strive to help all Montanans enjoy an abundance of library services, sufficient to their individual needs and responsive to their communities' needs.

It has been my privilege and a genuine pleasure to serve you.

Bruce Newell