590: Local Notes -- Confessions of a Reluctant Advocate

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You had to love the December 2010-January 2011 issue of Against the Grain. It took on the enormously relevant and sometimes troubling issue of library sustainability. An array of articles suggested that libraries go green, curtail their electrical use, reorganize their buildings, and jetison their dependence on oil. None of the authors got to the point of urging libraries to recycle their roof rainwater runoff or to compost their break room leftovers, but even if they had, who would have objected? We all need green and sustainable libraries.

Nevertheless, something was missing. Call it a serious omission, if you like, or a troubling lacuna. No one talked about the nation’s increasing government indebtedness and the part that libraries play in that totally unsustainable financial boondoggle. In particular, the issue lacked any discussion of the wisdom of library advocacy at the federal level — that unfinching addiction to federal library spending or specifically how that addiction relates to the notion of sustainability. In short, we needed a frank and open discussion about the extremely questionable tendency of libraries to clamor for and go after every single federal dollar they can — a practice that is from a financial perspective (shall be come right out and say it?) anything but sustainable.

Now, don’t get me wrong. Advocacy at the federal level has its merits. Even on the basic of pragmatics, one could argue that libraries need to fight for every single federal dollar they can get — just like every other lobby. If we do not stand up for libraries, if we are not out there contacting our representatives on behalf of libraries, then who will?

Nor am I not about to deny that we may have one of the best cases for robust federal outlays. Moreover, the results of such funding have to be more beneficial and more enlightened than your run-of-the mill special interest group. Just like every other lobby, if we do not stand up for libraries, if we are not there contacting our representatives on behalf of libraries, then who will?

Endnotes


