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Update on West Bend Library Controversy: Board Members Removed, ALA and Free Speech Groups Object

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[Update on West Bend Library Controversy: Board Members Removed, ALA and Free Speech Groups Object](#)

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[The controversy](#) over the status of various GLBTQ-themed books (and now, [apparently](#), any “sexually explicit” books) in the young adult section at the West Bend Library has taken a turn for the worse. The city’s common council voted against reappointing four members of the library board over disapproval of their actions (or non-actions) regarding the desire to reclassify and restrict access to these library materials. As one [news account reports](#):

The West Bend Common Council, upset over the handling of a citizen call to restrict sexually-explicit books in the listing recommended for teenage readers, rejected reappointing four members of the city’s Library Board Tuesday night.

“They’re all good people,” said Alderman Terry Vrana, who voted against the four reappointments. “I disagree with them.”

He said the appointees were not serving the interests of the community “with their ideology.”

Vrana said he wanted people on the Library Board “who think and use a little common sense. I’m concerned about the morality of this city.”

The vote was 5-3 not to approve Mayor Kristine Deiss’ recommendation to reappoint Library Board members Tom Fitz, Mary Reilly-Kliss, James Poulos and Alderman Nick Dobberstein to three-year terms. Fitz is a 24-year member of the Library Board and a retired librarian from the University of Wisconsin-Washington County. Poulos is a well-regarded attorney. Reilly-Kliss is a retired school teacher, employee at Fireside Books & Gifts and a master gardener. Dobberstein, besides being a West Bend alderman teaches English at Hartford Union High School.

This is truly remarkable. The city council has ejected a 24-year veteran of the board (also a retired academic librarian), an attorney, and two teachers because they disagreed with their “ideology” about what the role of a public library is in a community. Four very intelligent people. People entrusted to educate the city’s children. People who have committed their lives to the spread of knowledge. And because they didn’t immediately cave to the demands of a vocal “citizen advocate,” they’re now getting kicked off of the library board. They now have an objectionable “ideology.”

This action has prompted a new round of condemnations, this time coming from the [American Library Association](#) and a collection of free speech organizations including the [American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression](#), the [National Coalition Against Censorship](#), the [Association of American Publishers](#) and [PEN American Center](#).

[From the ALA:](#)

Last week, the West Bend, Wisconsin Common Council voted to deny reappointment to four Library Board members, based on objections to these members' 'ideology' and their adherence to library policy concerning challenges to materials in the library collection. This move appears to be motivated largely in response to an ongoing campaign that seeks to restrict access to books in the West Bend Community Memorial Library's young adult collection of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender fiction and nonfiction.

We are dismayed by and deeply concerned about these developments. Libraries connect people and ideas, by providing access to a diverse array of information to meet the needs of everyone in the community. Whatever their personal beliefs, library board members have an obligation to support this unique role of the public library. When individuals or groups attempt to block access to library materials in the name of their own particular beliefs, we must all oppose such efforts and we must preserve the intellectual freedom rights of the entire community....

And from the coalition of free speech organizations ([PDF of their statement](#)):

...The library is for everyone, but that doesn't mean that every book is appropriate for every patron. On the contrary, professional librarians choose books to reflect a diversity of topics and viewpoints that meet the needs and interests of all patrons. Those who object to the books are entitled to their views and need not read anything that offends them, but they have no right to impose their opinions on others. If parents have concerns about their own children's reading choices, is it their responsibility to direct and supervise them, not to expect the library to reflect their views about parenting. No one is forced to read a book because it sits on a library shelf.

The West Bend Common Council should strive to be objective in choosing the members of the Library Board, evaluating candidates based on their ability and interest in the job, not on the political and social opinions they hold. Such a process is essential to guard against reliance on subjective judgments and to ensure that library materials are evaluated using only objective, constitutionally-sound criteria.

We strongly urge you to protect the right of all readers to read and think freely. By keeping the challenged books in the young adults section, you will demonstrate respect for your patrons and their choices; for the professionalism of the librarians who serve the reading public; and for the First Amendment and its central role in a pluralistic, democratic society.

I urge you to read these statements in their entirety, which are all in line with the [statement issued by the School of Information Studies](#) at UW-Milwaukee prior to the removal of the library board members.

I also urge other organizations and persons committed to the fundamental human right of intellectual freedom to speak out against the escalating efforts to restrict access to books for young adults in the West Bend Community Library.

:: UPDATE :: [Seven Stories Press](#), an independent book publisher, has [issued a call to action](#) to “let the Common Council know how you feel, and why you believe that “protecting” kids in small towns from books that deal favorably with homosexuality is not an appropriate action for a taxpayer-funded library to take.”

::UPDATE:: Additional coverage at [School Library Journal](#) (and [Google News](#), of course).