

# Libraries

From A1

think the potential Racine-Walworth-Rock alliance would encourage other library mergers.

Ben Miller, library services director for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, said he is confident that other library administrators would take note and would engage their neighboring library systems in merger talks.



Zimmermann



Miller

All three county boards are expected to decide on the library restructuring by September.

Meanwhile, local library boards in both the Lakeshores and Arrowhead systems are stepping forward individually to offer their

support for the merger.

The Burlington Library Board in Racine County voted unanimously Tuesday to become the latest getting on board with the proposal.

Burlington Library Director Joe Davies said the consolidation would eliminate needless duplication of administrative resources by putting all 22 facilities under one management structure.

"It'll be a different dynamic," Davies said. "But I think it's a good opportunity."

Racine Library Director Angela Zimmermann said she, too, welcomes the potential for increased sharing of resources among libraries, as well as maximizing the impact of the combined financial assets.

The Racine Library Board has likewise voted to get behind the merger.

"There are a plethora of benefits and reasons this merger makes sense," Zimmermann said.

Wisconsin currently has 16 regional systems managing a combined 380 public libraries statewide. The libraries are funded through a combination of state ap-



SCOTT WILLIAMS, JOURNAL TIMES FILE PHOTO

Michelle Hughes, left, and her sister, Samantha Ness, pick out books to borrow at the Burlington Public Library in a file photo from last year.

propriations and local support.

All of the library systems come under the ultimate supervision of the state Department of Public Instruction — the same state agency that oversees public schools.

State officials have spent years trying to persuade library administrators to consider merging as a way of increasing efficiency and stretching dollars.

Mergers with neigh-

boring systems took place about five years ago after a breakup of the struggling Mid-Wisconsin Library System, which had been serving Dodge, Jefferson and Washington counties. But no consolidation has taken place on a purely voluntary basis.

Officials with the Lakeshores and Arrowhead systems agreed last year to consider such a merger. The two neighboring networks already were working co-

operatively on information technology, marketing, and circulation.

Lakeshores has a total of 108,804 members in Racine County and another 47,654 in Walworth County. Arrowhead has 126,259 throughout Rock County.

Together, the two systems receive \$1.3 million a year in state aid.

After the two formed a joint committee to study consolidation, the committee called for a merger earlier this summer, saying, "This merger will benefit the member libraries and the public they serve."

On the eight-member committee, only one person voted against moving toward a merger: Racine County Board Supervisor Bob Miller, who serves on the board of the Lakeshores system.

Miller, no relation to the state's Ben Miller, said he had misgivings about whether the merger concept was vetted thoroughly enough. After system administrators promised to draft more detailed plans later, Miller said he agreed to add his support.

The board of the Arrowhead system endorsed the

new alliance July 13, and the Lakeshores system board did the same on July 19.

Miller added that he suspects the library consolidation will pass muster with the Racine County Board, too.

"I cannot predict how everyone is going to feel about it," he said. "But I think there are plenty of pluses."

All public libraries that receive state funds are required by Oct. 15 to present DPI with operating plans for the coming year. If the merger receives support at the county board level, Lakeshores and Arrowhead officials plan by Oct. 15 to present the state with detailed plans for the as-yet-unnamed consolidated library network.

Steve Ohs, director of the Lakeshores system, said the new tri-county system then would "go live" when the new year begins on Jan. 1.

Ohs said he has heard no opposition from any local library board, and he is feeling increasingly upbeat about the merger's future.

"I think there's a good path forward," he said. "It's very heartening to see."