

Leelanau Township Library

By: Mark Morton

Governance and Administrative Restructuring

In the spring of 2022, a grassroots group of township residents came together with a clear objective: to establish the library as an independent governmental entity with a dedicated and stable source of funding. This group coalesced into a formal campaign committee called Yes! Leelanau Library to advocate for the passage of a millage that would be the first step in creating a new governance structure. On November 8, 2022, voters in Leelanau Township approved the proposal by a decisive 68% margin, which authorized a 0.5 mill operating levy and established the library under Michigan Public Act 164 of 1877. This statute enables township libraries to organize as separate governmental units independent of direct township control.

Following the election, the Leelanau Township Board acted promptly to implement the will of the voters by appointing six community members to serve as an interim Library Board of Trustees. This appointed body transitioned to a fully elected board in November 2024, which completed the governance shift envisioned by the ballot initiative. In March 2023, the newly appointed Library Board entered into an intergovernmental agreement with the Township. This agreement transferred ownership of the library's collections and operational assets to the Library Board and established a lease arrangement allowing the library to continue operating within the township-owned building. At that time, library staff, including the director, became employees of the Library rather than the Township. Township Supervisor, Richard Cross, played a key role in facilitating this transition, while ensuring that the separation of governance occurred smoothly and without disruption to services.

The Library Board of Trustees began meeting in January 2023, and on April 1, the library formally commenced operations as an independent governmental authority supported by its dedicated millage. Prior to this transition, there had been no separate library advisory body; all library operations were managed directly by the Township Board. Starting from the ground up, the new Library Board adopted bylaws, established governance procedures, and began operating in compliance with Michigan's Open Meetings Act. The Library was subsequently recognized by the Library of Michigan as a public library established under PA 164, making it eligible for state aid.

After establishing a stable and locally-controlled funding source, the Library was able to expand its hours of operation and increase staffing levels. These organizational improvements resulted in measurable growth in both library patrons and circulation, which

clearly indicates the community's demand for enhanced services and underscores the obvious benefits of these structural and governance changes.

Current Services

The Library provides both traditional library services and the modern resources that today's patrons have come to expect. Its collection includes physical materials such as books, audiobooks, DVDs, magazines, and newspapers, ensuring access to information, entertainment, and lifelong learning opportunities for residents and visitors alike.

In addition to its local collection, the Library participates in the statewide Michigan eLibrary (MeL) program, which gives patrons access to materials from public and academic libraries throughout the state. Through MeL interlibrary loan services, library users can borrow items from collections far beyond what a small community library could otherwise provide.

Despite its modest size, the Library maintains a particularly strong focus on serving children and families. Summer Reading programs and youth-centered activities held at the Marina Pavilion are consistently well attended and provide opportunities for learning, creativity, and community engagement. The Library's welcoming children's area, dedicated in memory of longtime children's librarian Mary Crowgey, serves as an inviting space where young readers can develop a lifelong love of books and learning.

The Library also offers a wide range of technology services. Wi-Fi is available both inside the building and throughout the surrounding grounds, which provides internet access to residents and visitors twenty-four hours a day. Public computers, printing, copying, and scanning services help bridge the digital divide and ensure that community members have access to essential technology resources. Notary services are also provided.

Digital collections have become an increasingly important part of library services. Through platforms such as Libby and Hoopla, patrons can access thousands of e books, audiobooks, movies, television programs, and other digital content from anywhere with an internet connection. These services greatly expand the Library's reach beyond its physical walls.

Recognizing that libraries now lend more than books, the Library also maintains a growing "Library of Things" that offers tools and equipment available for loan. This collection includes items such as bicycles, a telescope, maker kits, hammocks, birdwatching equipment, and other specialty items that allow patrons to explore new interests, enjoy recreational opportunities, and access resources that might otherwise be unavailable to them.

Although space is limited, the Library strives to offer meaningful in-person programming that enriches community life. Lectures, author events, educational workshops, and cultural programs provide opportunities for learning and social connection throughout the year. In this

effort, the Friends of the Leelanau Township Library play an invaluable role. This dedicated group of volunteers raises funds, advocates for library services, and sponsors many of the Library's most popular events, including the Summer Writer Series, annual Book Sale, and the beloved Robert Burns Night celebration.

Taken together, these services demonstrate that today's library is far more than a repository for books. It serves as a community gathering place, technology hub, educational resource, cultural center, and a lifelong learning institution that benefits residents of all ages.

The Library Building Space

One of the Board's earliest initiatives was to engage the consulting firm Re-Thinking Libraries to develop a comprehensive strategic plan and facilities study. This process was grounded in extensive community engagement, including in-person public input sessions and a survey that garnered nearly 300 responses. The findings confirmed what had long been understood anecdotally: the existing facility is insufficient to meet the expectations of a modern public library.

The current building, which opened on May 20, 1968, was designed for a very different model of library services, focused primarily on the circulation of physical books. In contrast, contemporary libraries serve as community centers that provide access to technology, internet, educational programming, and youth engagement opportunities. Unfortunately, the existing facility lacks public restrooms and does not meet accessibility standards under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Moreover, the strategic plan identified numerous programs and services desired by the community that cannot be accommodated within the building's current footprint. The facilities study further outlined space requirements based on both year-round usage and significant seasonal population increases during the summer months.

In response to this documented need, which was reinforced by a clear mandate from voters in the 2024 election, the Library Board has actively worked to identify and acquire property suitable for a new library facility. A prior expansion study conducted in 2015 recommended the library keep its current space and expand into the space currently occupied by the township offices, plus add a second-floor addition to the existing structure. This proposal would require the Township to move its offices to a new location, which would also give the Township more space for offices, records, and public meetings.

An updated facilities analysis was completed in 2025 that provided estimates for this proposed building expansion. However, the current Board, informed by the updated plan and estimate, determined that renovating and expanding the existing building would be prohibitively expensive when accounting for necessary code compliance and energy

efficiency upgrades; and the plan would still fall short of meeting long-term community needs, including the demand for large community meeting spaces in Northport.

The facilities needs assessment concluded that approximately 7,600 square feet would be required to serve the year-round population effectively, plus it projected a need for nearly 12,500 square feet during peak summer months. By comparison, the current library is approximately 2,800 square feet, which emphasizes the scale of the challenge.

After carefully evaluating potential locations for a new library facility in Northport, the Library Board became aware of an opportunity involving the current Northport Pub & Grill building. At the time, the owners were constructing a new kitchen in the southern portion of the building and were considering either renovating or selling the northern portion. When approached by the Board, they expressed a willingness to explore the possibility of relocating the Library to the site.

Initial discussions focused on acquiring and renovating only a portion of the building, which would have required substantial modifications to the existing footprint, including the construction of an addition to accommodate a community meeting space. As conversations progressed, the owners indicated they might be open to selling the entire property. The Library Board subsequently proposed acquiring the full facility, a solution that would eliminate the need for a costly expansion while also disposing of the need to create a clear separation between library operations and other commercial uses. Recognizing the long-term benefits such a project could bring to the community, the owners proved to be thoughtful and enthusiastic partners in exploring a vision that could serve residents and visitors for generations.

In February 2026, the Library entered into an option agreement to purchase the property and began the quiet phase of a capital campaign to raise funds for both the acquisition and renovation of the building without seeking an additional property tax millage. After engaging architects and construction professionals to develop preliminary concepts and cost estimates, it was determined that approximately \$4 million would be required to purchase and renovate the facility. In addition, the Library established a goal of creating a \$1 million endowment fund to help provide for the long-term maintenance and stewardship of the building.

To support these efforts, the Library partnered with the Leelanau Township Community Foundation to administer both the capital campaign and the endowment fund. As of this writing, fundraising efforts are progressing successfully, and sufficient commitments are anticipated to complete the building purchase and fund the initial design phase. Additional fundraising efforts will continue to support the renovation and construction of the new library. The current building concepts remain preliminary. The next phase of the project will involve forming a building committee that will work closely with architects, library planners, and

interior design specialists to create a facility that best serves the needs of Leelanau Township residents while remaining flexible enough to meet future community needs.

The proposed facility will significantly expand the Library's ability to provide services and programs. Preliminary plans include a larger children's area, a dedicated teen space, study and conference rooms, expanded collections, and improved ADA accessibility throughout the building. The project also envisions the creation of a large community meeting space that will be available both during and after library operating hours. These spaces will be equipped with modern technology and will be designed to support lifelong learning, community engagement, civic participation, and cultural programming for residents and visitors alike.

As a child using the Leelanau Township Library in the early 1970s, I did not yet understand the role a thriving library plays in the life of a community. What I did understand—even then—was the sense of connection it fostered: a place where an individual could feel part of something larger. Today, given the broad-based support for the library, there is a meaningful opportunity to create a space that sustains and strengthens that connection for generations to come.

The Library's strategic plan and facilities study are publicly available and can be accessed via the "About Us" section of the library's website:

<https://www.leelanautownshiplibrary.org/about-us-1>

Mark Morton is the President of the Leelanau Township Library Board of Trustees and Director of the Leland Township Public Library. He is a graduate of Northport Public School, Northwestern Michigan College, and nearly a lifelong resident of Leelanau Township