

Email to Commissioners

Subject: Library Director Appointment – Governance Recommendation and Process Concerns

Dear Commissioners,

Thank you for your continued service to Escambia County and for your engagement in the selection of the next Director of West Florida Public Libraries.

I write to respectfully express serious concern regarding the decision to advance a candidate other than Ms. Vinson, who was unanimously recommended by the WFPL Board of Governance following a thorough and transparent selection process.

The Board's recommendation was grounded in careful evaluation of qualifications, leadership experience, statutory alignment, and the long-term operational needs of a system serving more than 330,000 residents with a multi-million-dollar public budget. Ms. Vinson holds a completed Master's degree in Library and Information Science, has extensive progressively responsible leadership experience in public library administration, has managed large and complex budgets, and has demonstrated strategic planning and operational oversight within multi-branch systems.

These credentials align directly with professional library standards and the scale of WFPL's responsibilities.

Importantly, Ms. Vinson fully satisfies the educational and professional qualifications contemplated under Florida Statute § 257.17, which governs public library operating grant eligibility. Compliance with this statute reinforces legislative expectations that public libraries be led by qualified professional librarians and protects eligibility for state operating funds. While we understand a waiver has been secured for the County's selected candidate, our residents deserve leadership that meets established standards without exception.

By contrast, the County's selected candidate does not currently hold a Master's degree in Library and Information Science and has not served in a professional librarian capacity. Librarianship is a credentialed profession requiring formal training. Systems of comparable size are led by administrators who have progressed through professional librarian roles. Both Ms. Vinson and our alternate candidate, Mr. Hare, meet this threshold; Ms. Bell-Rivera does not. Absent a waiver, this deficiency could have placed up to \$100,000 in grant funding at risk. While the waiver mitigates immediate financial impact, it does not change the underlying concern regarding qualifications.

Disregarding a unanimous Board recommendation following a comprehensive vetting process risks undermining governance integrity and public confidence. Since the Board's transition from advisory to governing status in 2013, County Commissioners have historically honored the Board's recommendation for Library Director. Departure from that precedent without clear explanation raises structural governance concerns.

For clarity, the timeline of this process is as follows:

- **October 9, 2025:** I met with the County Administrator regarding the open Director position. At that time, Mr. Moreno indicated a preference to continue with the acting

director. I reiterated that the Board's bylaws charge it with conducting a search and recommending a Director to the County.

- **Subsequent meetings:** When questioned by former Board member Lori NeSmith regarding transparency in the search, the Administrator indicated his team would work collaboratively with the Board to ensure a thorough and transparent process.
- As Ms. NeSmith researched prior director searches and raised concerns regarding the unfolding process, she was subsequently notified that her service on the Board was no longer needed.
- When applications were received, Ms. Bell-Rivera was listed among qualified candidates despite not holding an MLIS degree or having served in a professional librarian role.

It is important to reiterate that the WFPL Board of Governance is a governing board, not an advisory body. Governing boards carry statutory oversight and institutional stewardship responsibilities. The Board's role in this process is not ceremonial; it exists to safeguard the professional integrity, operational stability, and long-term credibility of the library system.

This communication is not a personal critique of any candidate. It is about process integrity, statutory compliance, professional standards, and preservation of public trust. The director position is the chief professional librarian role for a complex, multi-branch public system.

Credentials and depth of professional experience are materially relevant to that responsibility. I encourage you to consider this before endorsing a candidate backed by county administrators who has not yet gained the required education and experience to permanently lead our growing library system.

Respectfully,
Blaine Wall, D.A.
Chair
WFPL Board of Governance