

Know your Public Library: Economic Benefits of a Public Library

While no one would reasonably expect a public library should be run like a private business—no more than any other public service institution such as village hall, police, fire or streets department—and be required to generate a profit, it is reasonable to expect every public library to provides identifiable public benefit in return for the public support. Every library should therefore be able to answer the question posed by the great folk philosopher, Janet Jackson, and answer “what have you done for me lately”?

In 2007, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction commissioned a study to measure the return on taxpayer investment in public libraries in Wisconsin. The study was published May 1, 2008 as *The Economic Contribution of Wisconsin Public Libraries to the Economy of Wisconsin*, and is available on line (citation on the website). While we cannot detail the full 82 page report in this brief article, we can hit the highlights. In short, the study demonstrated an astonishing fact: every dollar of taxpayer investment to a library yields \$4.06 in returns to the community. The return is not only the obvious direct economic contribution through salaries to staff, and the attendant income and sales tax revenue, but also the overall market value of public library services.

The issue has been studied in many states, and the state DPI website lists reports from across the country. But whether the state was Colorado or Florida, Minnesota or Texas, the results consistently show the demonstrable positive economic benefits of a library to its community.

As large a return as this is, the report did not measure the value of community meeting space. Both community meeting spaces in New Glarus (at the school and village hall) are heavily used.

The economic benefit to a community and its citizens by providing open access to information cannot be overstated. Thus, for example, the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development in its publication *Where to Look for Jobs* (DWSJ-9467), at page 3 specifically directs job applicants to work through their local public library. Not only is a public library a source of information on available jobs, and employers, but it can provide free access to the internet, newspapers, email, resume building tools, and word processing software.

But we do not need to look for state agency affirmation, or studies to confirm what is intuitively obvious in our own community. Even in its current cramped quarters, the New Glarus Public Library provides essential and quality programming for many local daycare providers. It is a resource for the New Glarus Home, and its residents. And it is a valuable sharing of public access to the internet to those amongst us who cannot afford such access at home, or the investment in technology.

So if Miss Jackson lived in New Glarus, and posed her question to our public library “What have you done for me lately,” the short and accurate answer is: a lot.