



**Press Conference Speech  
March 16, 2005**

I am Stephen Hedges, the Director of the Nelsonville Public Library system, which is responsible for the operation of the seven free public libraries in Athens County. I am honored to have been asked to say a few words on behalf of Ohio's public libraries, and what Governor Taft's budget proposal will mean to library service in our county.

Last year in Athens County we checked out almost 650,000 items, we welcomed over 18,000 children and teenagers to special library programs, our buildings were visited 450,000 times, and we provided more than 60,000 hours of free, fast, and safe Internet access to people who may or may not have home computers. Our libraries are an active and valued part of the cities, towns and villages of Athens County. The same can be said for every public library system in this state, all 251 of them.

I am here today to call attention to the erosion of the state's commitment to public library funding. Some twenty years ago, the state legislature made a commitment to providing all Ohio's citizens, not just those in wealthier counties who could pass local tax levies, with reasonable public library service by establishing the Library and Local Government Support Fund, or "LLGSF." This has been an efficient and equitable system for financing our libraries. Because of the stability and support of the LLGSF, we have been able to sustain the highest public library circulation and use rates in the nation -- right here in our state of Ohio.

For the last four years, however, state funding of public libraries has been slipping downward. Today we receive more than 8% less state funding than we did in 2001. In fact, most libraries today are operating on the same dollars that we received in 1998. The Governor's proposed budget would now accelerate that slippage, implementing an additional 5% cut to our already reduced funding. Since our library, like four out of five libraries across Ohio, receives well over 90% of its operating budget exclusively from the LLGSF, all of these reductions have a direct and damaging impact on our ability to provide library services to the public.

Of even greater concern to us, however, is the Governor's plan to reduce personal income taxes by 21% over the next five years. The current LLGSF formula calculates library funding at

5.7% of personal income tax collections. Although public libraries have been “off formula” since 2001, the Governor’s budget proposal presumes that public libraries will return to the formula in the next biennium budget. That is when the impact of the personal income tax cut will impose an absolutely disastrous effect on our library budget, constituting an overall reduction in funding of more than 30% by the year 2010.

Librarians are now struggling to stop the continuing deterioration of our public library funding. We are encouraging our legislators to end the erosion of the LLGSF. But even more important, we must motivate the legislature to stabilize library funding and move it to firmer financial ground.

The time has come to revisit the way the state funds public library service. When the LLGSF was developed in the mid-1980s, a bipartisan committee with representatives from both the House and the Senate worked for about 18 months to devise the current formula. That formula has been ignored over the past three budget cycles.

We are here today to ask our legislators to support our efforts to develop a new, reasonable, stable and predictable mechanism for funding Ohio's public libraries. As they know from their constituents, public library service is highly regarded and considered by many to be essential to our overall quality of life in this state.

Twenty years ago, we developed an efficient and effective library funding mechanism. Today, it is time for this legislature to develop a plan that continues to support our libraries, so that tomorrow we can proudly say that Ohio's public libraries are still an outstanding Ohio resource.

Thank you.