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Political Friction

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John Chrastka

We should only be surprised at how long it took the *Americans for Prosperity* mega PAC to come out against libraries, not that it would ever happen. The proximal cause of their attacks were two concurrent ballot measures on the March 15, 2016 Illinois consolidated primary for the Plainfield Library District. The library board asked voters in their growing Chicago ex-burb to consider a new library building and an operating levy to run the library. The particulars of the project had already drawn out some local, vocal opposition by a small group of apparently concerned taxpayers. At EveryLibrary, we had already put our strategic and tactical support behind the local Vote Yes committee. But on the Thursday before Election Day, the political conversation changed dramatically when the Koch Brothers-funded AFP Illinois team deployed their direct mail and robocall Vote No campaign. In the face of the AFP attack, the merits of the library building plan were rendered irrelevant, as were the particular objections by the local neighborhood No folks. A robust local discussion about priorities for the community, as expressed through both Yes and No campaigns about a new library, evaporated in the face of a well-funded, agenda-driven ideological battle against taxes.

In that it has taken a long time for the Koch Brothers to show up against libraries is curious. Americans for Prosperity is abundantly clear and consistently active in attempting to realize a vision of American civic, economic, and social life that is governed by free market principles. On issues of tax policy, these free market principles guide AFP's attempts to block tax measures that affect individuals and corporations while working actively for new legislation that would roll-back taxes at all levels of government. Their fervent desires are driven by an ideological belief that regulation harms both individual liberty and dampens the entrepreneurial spirit. Their philosophy is that any tax is a bad tax. Taxes drag down economic prosperity by making the individual subject to the state.

As a library community, we may feel that because our libraries change lives and transform lives that we should be exempt from the anti-tax agenda. That we, libraries, are somehow 'good taxes' and we should therefore be spared. We may even have hoped that libraries are too small a unit of government to be noticed by these anti-tax forces. Library advocates cut their teeth on the pie-chart showing that local taxes go to schools, police and fire, and

public works leaving libraries a few crumbs. Because the ire of anti-tax forces are focused on the biggest pieces of the pie, their omission has so far spared us their attention.

Plainfield isn't the only place where a free market economic philosophy or a Tea Party campaign has targeted libraries as shrinkable units of government. It may be the first Americans for Prosperity target, but the library leadership in Baldwin MI, Bollinger MO, Meridian ID, and Pomona CA, have all experienced organized anti-tax campaigns against them. For the last few years, Kentucky libraries were under direct attack by the Tea Party of Northern Kentucky via a court case that was driven by free market principles about taxes.

The AFP robocalls and direct mail against the Plainfield Library weren't about The Library any more than the Tea Party suit in Kentucky was. This spring in Kansas, the Americans for Prosperity chapter there sent a lobbyist to speak in favor of a bill that would dismantle library taxing districts in the state. The lobbyist in Kansas made a statement that was emblematic of our plight: "I feel like I should go on record to say, 'I do like libraries.'" And then he proceeded to testify to the state legislature how disassembling libraries as independent taxing districts is good for Kansas. The AFP / Tea Party message is always about The Taxes. In their Plainfield attacks, they never once questioned the merits of having a new 21st century library. The work that librarians do in supporting individuals and communities grow and learn wasn't at issue in Kentucky, either. As a think tank, Americans for Prosperity didn't attempt to refute any study showing how a 21st century library improves educational outcomes in a community. They didn't even need to read them. AFP and the Tea Party can take their "any tax is a bad tax" message about a library to the electorate and win. The image of libraries, any library, is not strong enough to overcome any tax.

A strength of free market economic philosophy is that it sounds an awful lot like individual liberty. The right of an individual to self-determination free of unnecessary or unwarranted government regulations and interference is a tenant of this economic-faith. The antithesis of a free market is one where behavior is coerced or penalized through policy, with the logical end game being a planned economy and a highly regulated list of allowable behaviors.

In libraries, we believe that we are defenders of liberty too. One of our oldest, and most effective, library advocacy organizations is called the Freedom to Read Foundation. It defends the First Amendment in libraries. There is some nostalgia among library champions for the “Libraries: An American Value” campaign of the mid 1990s. We believe that we are at the forefront of ensuring an American democracy that is thriving because it is informed. The democratic electorate is informed because we provide access to information for all.

Then why are we under attack by free market individualists and the Tea Party? Shouldn't we be able to find natural allies among those individualists? We believe, we know, that we support the individual. Unfortunately, alliances and rapprochement is not possible because the core argument of a free market individualist and their Tea Party cousins is one of deregulation and minimal government. That spirit of deregulation includes a belief that the lowest level of tax burden is of the highest virtue. If the goal is to minimize government, libraries, while an arguably functional unit of government, are still government in need of minimization. Or elimination. We may hope to find examples of people across the free market spectrum who draw their line in the sand against new taxes instead of all taxes. But when we're asking for an increase to our operating levy or general fund allocation to better serve our public, we're a new tax, too.

The Americans for Prosperity and the Tea Party never need to come out against what libraries do or who librarians are to defeat library tax measures. They just mention The Tax and their job is done. Our librarian muscle-memory is strong for fights against censorship and in support of privacy. However, our ability to talk about taxes, how we spend public funds, and how we are public employees funded by taxes, is rather weak. As a profession, we have lost the narrative about what a progressive tax policy does to fund the common good. There is a systems-wide, generational hesitancy to name the fact that we run libraries and pay librarians with tax dollars. We have adopted a kind of professional-euphemistic shield when speaking about taxes. We use terms like “funding” or “revenue” or “support” in place of taxes. In doing so, we have decoupled library work and library outcomes from the taxes that fuel 90% or more of our institutions' balance sheets. When we shy away from talk about the taxes that create and sustain institutions that are fundamentally transformative,

and the taxes that pay the salaries of people who are the change agents in their communities, we lose the argument before it starts.

Over the last generation or two, free market ideologues have made community-centric ideals like helping our neighbor and pooling our resources akin to the worst excesses of the Great Leap Forward. At best, tax support is allowed only if purified and validated by a Public Private Partnership that includes a high bar of philanthropy in place of public taxation. Librarians need to regain the high ground of ideas about what taxes do to fund the common good. We can use adjectives like ‘smart’ and ‘effective’ because that is the truth of how they are spent. We need to get comfortable on our boards and in our staff meetings saying the word ‘taxes’ again. We need the courage to take an even more fundamental step and ask ourselves and our colleagues about why we do library work, and why we serve on boards and commissions.

If we believe that for public institutions to be legitimate they must survive on private charity, we are in the wrong business or serve on the wrong boards. But if the reason you work in a library is to provide a hand-up to folks looking to better themselves, please talk about your commitment to them. If it is to create a nation of kids who are ready for Kindergarten and read at grade level, please talk about your work with those kids. Let us be visible as the enactors of the common good in our towns. Enactors who are funded by taxes we have long chosen to pay to build better communities.

About the Author

EveryLibrary's founder is John Chrastka, a long-time library trustee, supporter, and advocate. Mr. Chrastka is a former partner in AssociaDirect, a Chicago-based consultancy focused on supporting associations in membership recruitment, conference, and governance activities. He is a former president and member of the Board of Trustees for the [Berwyn \(IL\) Public Library](#) (2006 – 2015) and is a former president of the Reaching Across Illinois Libraries System ([RAILS](#)) multi-type library system. Prior to his work at AssociaDirect, he was Director for Membership Development at the American Library Association ([ALA](#)). He is a member of ALA as well as the Illinois Library Association ([ILA](#)), and the American Political Sciences Association ([APSA](#)). He is named a 2014 Mover & Shaker by Library Journal and tweets [@mrchrastka](#).