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May 4, 2021

Board of County Commissioners  
500 San Sebastian View  
St. Augustine, FL 32084

Dear Commissioners:

As president of the Florida Library Association (FLA), I am writing to urge you to reconsider the option of privatizing your public library. Changing from a public to a privately-operated library could negatively impact the high quality of service the residents of St. Johns County have come to expect and may jeopardize your ability to receive grants and donations to support library operations.

In 1999, the Florida Library Association issued the following statement, reaffirming in 2011:

*The Florida Library Association believes it is not in the best interest of the residents of Florida for publicly-supported libraries to be managed by for-profit organizations. Therefore, the Association opposes any efforts to provide library service by contracting with such organizations.*

There are many reasons why it benefits your community to keep public libraries public. Publicly run services require accountability to the public. Their budgets are available for public scrutiny and this lets the public know how their tax dollars are spent. A for-profit company is accountable to investors and, by definition, would prioritize profit over the needs of St. Johns County residents. Public libraries were not established to make a profit, they exist to provide access to information, ideas, and technology so every member of the community can be informed and have the opportunity to participate fully in society.

Privatizing your library will diminish community involvement in the decision-making process, will remove your ability to decide which titles and formats of books and other materials are added to your collection, and will reduce the local community's ability to provide input on library programs and services. Staff costs are often targeted in order to reduce budgets. Will you lose staff? Will you replace professional, highly trained staff with those less qualified? Is that in the best interest of your community? Privatization could also limit the library's ability to receive grants or donations. Short term savings may not be sustained in the long term.

Statistics available on the state library website show that in FY 2017-2018, the library's per capita expenditures were \$24.94, considerably less than the statewide average of \$27.96. It seems the library is already being operated economically. FY 2017-2018 data also shows that library visits per capita were 3.72, above the statewide average of 3.25.

St. Johns County Public Library System is a valuable resource for your community and I urge you to consider what they would need to give up in order for a privately-run company to make a profit.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Laura I. Spears". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "S" at the end.

Laura I. Spears, PhD  
President, Florida Library Association

Cc: Hunter Conrad, County Administrator