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VBH BOT FYI Finance

1 message

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Northern Illinois library systems merge to provide shared services
Comments

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As of July 1, the five library systems that now serve libraries throughout northern Illinois will combine to form RAILS - Reaching Across Illinois Library System.

The name was chosen last month by members of the Merger Transition Team, which has met regularly for several months to see the merger process through. The decision to combine the Metropolitan, Alliance, DuPage, North Suburban and Prairie Area library systems, which provide services such as interlibrary loans of books and other materials, was made in January as an answer to ongoing financial woes faced by the state-funded operations.

The naming of the new system is just the latest step in the ongoing effort to merge the five systems into one. Next on the to-do list is the selection of a leader, said Su Erickson, president of the transition team.

"Right now, we're in the process of selecting our interim director," Erickson said.

The transition team also is accepting applications through April 22 for members of the board of directors. Fifteen representatives from throughout the service area will be chosen. As work continues toward a July 1 launch of the new system, members of the transition team await approval of the merger from Secretary of State Jesse White. Tom Sloan, staff liaison to the merger transition team, said that could come at any time.

The future of all nine library systems in Illinois was questioned last year when the state failed to come through with funding. Some systems experienced layoffs and cutbacks. Sloan, executive director of the DuPage Library System, said the decision to merge the five northern systems and four southern systems into just two library systems was "making lemonade out of lemons."

Seeing that the state's fiscal situation wasn't going to improve anytime soon, the systems' leaders made a decision to consolidate.

"We were ahead of our time," Sloan said.

The decision has meant cuts in services, including the loss of continuing education for Illinois library employees, and more than 70 jobs have been cut throughout the five northern Illinois systems, including 12.5 full-time positions in the Burr Ridge-based Metropolitan Library System. But money will be saved and services will continue to be provided to libraries and their patrons, Sloan said.

The new system will concentrate its efforts on delivery of materials between libraries, the system-wide computer system and the talking book program, which provides recorded books for people with visual disabilities.

Sloan said that as of April 16, the state has paid 47 percent of its 2010-11 financial allotment to the existing library systems.

"We're still waiting to receive the remaining 53 percent," said Sloan, who expects to receive at least some of the money after the fiscal year ends on June 30. "The expectation is that payments are going to be delayed."

Erickson said it is likely that some buildings belonging to the five library systems will be sold as the merger moves forward, but no decisions have been made.

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