

# **GUIDELINES FOR LIBRARY MILL LEVY ELECTIONS**



**MONTANA  
STATE LIBRARY**  
A GREATER STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

GUIDELINES FOR LIBRARY MILL LEVY ELECTIONS (February 2024)

Introduction .....2

    What is a dedicated mill levy? .....2

    Where in the law does it say public libraries can ask for a dedicated mill levy? How does it work? .....2

    What is the role of the library board in this process? .....2

    What is the role of the library director? .....3

    What is the role of library staff? .....3

Quick summary of the process .....4

    Questions to consider when thinking about obtaining additional mills for the library .....4

    Process for acquiring additional mills for the library .....4

    The Election Calendar .....6

Keeping it Legal .....7

    Circulating the Petition .....8

        Tips and instructions for petition carriers: .....8

Getting Out the Vote .....9

Tips for the Mill Levy Campaign .....9

## Introduction

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This handbook gives guidance on the process for asking a community for additional mills (property taxes) for library services. The handbook starts with general information about mill levies, the law that gives libraries the ability to ask the community for more funding, and guidance on the roles of different groups when a library is engaged in a mill levy campaign. Most of the handbook is about the process libraries need to follow if they are asking voters for additional funds.

### What is a dedicated mill levy?

It is a source of funding where a majority of voters have agreed to pay higher property taxes to receive a service. A mill is one thousandth of the total property certified taxable valuation of a taxing jurisdiction. Thus, if the total taxable valuation of a city is \$2,000,000, a one mill levy would yield \$2,000 in property tax revenue ( $\$2,000,000/1,000$ ). Source: *Montana Municipal Officials Handbook*

### Where in the law does it say public libraries can ask for a dedicated mill levy? How does it work?

[22-1-304, MCA](#) is the piece of code that allows libraries to ask the voters for more funding. It spells out the process for going for more mills. Either a city council or a county commission can pass a resolution to put the issue on the ballot or they can ask library supporters to go through a petition process to gather signatures from 5% of the resident taxpayers to place the issue on the ballot. If library supporters gather enough signatures, the local government body will pass a resolution placing it on the ballot. Supporters will then campaign for a “yes” vote. If a majority of voters say yes, the library will receive additional mills. There is a delay in receipt of funding. The additional mills need to be added to property tax bills and paid by taxpayers before it is given to the library.

A separate group is usually created to run the campaign. It often includes members of library support groups as well as other community members who are passionate about the library.

### What is the role of the library board in this process?

As the body responsible for monitoring the library’s finances, the library board needs to vote on whether to pursue additional mill levy funding. Members will continue to play a role in advocating for additional funding and answering questions from the public and local government officials.

## **What is the role of the library director?**

The library director is usually the liaison between local government officials and the library board. They cannot advocate for additional funding while on work time. It is acceptable for them to attend meetings and give factual presentations about the mill levy. The director is also often the liaison between the support groups who will help with the campaign and the library board and staff. They can help answer questions about the benefit of the additional mills and keep everyone apprised of the progress of the campaign.

## **What is the role of library staff?**

Library staff CANNOT advocate for the library on work time. Staff can answer questions about the mill levy campaign. They cannot ask people to vote yes. It's best for staff to have a one-page handout they can give to the public. Staff are ambassadors for the library. People tend to vote yes for the library because of the library staff and the wonderful customer service they receive.

## Quick summary of the process

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The sections below will talk about each step in the process.

1. Discuss whether or not to go for additional mills and what the boundaries of your area will be – city, county, city plus part of county
2. Talk to local government officials about their support
3. Develop an election calendar
4. Gather volunteers to help with campaign
5. If necessary, go through petition process
6. Volunteers campaign for mill levy (staff must stay out of this part of the process)
7. Have election

## Questions to consider when thinking about obtaining additional mills for the library

- What are the benefits (short term/long term) of obtaining additional mills for the library?
- What are the (short term/long term) consequences of not seeking additional funding?
- What are the (short term/long term) consequences of failing to pass a levy?
- Can taxpayers bear the additional mill?
- What is the overall mill levy? The city and/or county must take all the mills into account before asking for more. Sometimes they can give you mills from the general fund, but they often must go through the voting process.
- Is there enough support for additional mills for the library?
- Who should you ask for additional mills? It could be only city residents, but it could also be a part of the county or the entire county. However, if you are a city library there are special considerations that must be addressed before going for more than city mills. Please contact MSL staff for more information.
- What should the duration of the levy be?

## Process for acquiring additional mills for the library

1. The board decides how many mills to ask for, the duration of the mill levy, and when and how they would like people to vote on the issue. Be sure to consider the pros and cons of mail-in ballots versus an election held at the polls. The board should develop an election calendar to help them through the process. The library board then approaches their local government officials (city council or county commission)
2. If city/county agrees to a vote on the additional mills, it can pass a resolution putting a vote on the ballot. *The city/county needs to pass this resolution at least 85 days before the vote.*
  - a. Required language can be found in [15-10-425, MCA](#), but here is a summary of the language required.

- i. Specific purpose for which the money will be used
  - ii. The specific amount of money or mills to be raised. The board will need to decide if it is going to ask for a specific number of mills or a specific amount of money. If the library is located in a growing or stable community a specific number of mills is the best choice. If a library is located in a community that is losing population and seeing the value of their mill go down a specific amount of money might be the best choice.
  - iii. Whether the levy is durational (1, 3, 5 years or something else) or whether it is permanent
3. If the city/county will not pass a resolution the board will need a petition signed by at least 5% of resident taxpayers asking for a vote to be put on the ballot. Required language for the petition can be found in [15-10-425, MCA](#) and is essentially the same as what is listed above. *The petition must be delivered to the county or city at least 90 days before the vote.*
4. Upon a resolution or receipt of valid petition followed by a resolution from the city/county, the issue is put to a vote of the people.
5. The library should form a committee comprised of friends and supporters of the library who will campaign for the additional mills.

## The Election Calendar

Month	Activity
January – March	Board defines goals and prepares budget for upcoming year, determines if a mill levy election will be needed
April - May	Trustees communicate with city or county commissioners about budget and the additional mill levy needs
June - July	Board seeks out the legal requirements and ballot language.
August - September	Trustees recruit for Board/citizens' task force and appoint task force members.
October - December	Task force identifies funding sources and develops the petition. Task force presents recommendations to the trustees. Trustees adopt task force recommendations and support petition.
January	Task force circulates petition, which must be signed by at least five percent of the resident taxpayers. Trustees meet with city or county clerk to review ballot language. Trustees and commissioners meet to discuss petition and election. Trustees and task force hold an informational meeting about the adopted mill levy vote.
February	Board files petition with governing body at least 90 days prior to the general election. Task force recruits a citizens' campaign committee.
March - May	Citizen's campaign committee prepares facts, fliers and other materials; holds information meetings for the public; and implements other steps in publicity campaign.
June	Election*

*\*Develop comparable timelines for elections not in June by working back from the date of election.*

## Keeping it Legal

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1. The Commissioner of Political Practices office has created a list of online resources that you might find helpful: <https://politicalpractices.mt.gov/>
2. Library staff and the director should not campaign for the mill levy while on professional time. They can answer questions, but should not indicate how people should vote. Please see [2-2-121 \(3a\), MCA](#) for more information about this issue.
3. Along with the above issue make sure that your task force and committee is a totally independent entity. This committee will solicit, collect, expend, and track election contributions and expenditures. This committee will need to raise funds for signs, advertisements, and other costs of campaigning for a mill levy.
4. Advertisements for the election should carry the name of the committee and the name of the treasurer. You don't want this to become an issue during your campaign, so take precautions beyond what is legally required. *Under no circumstance should you use tax dollars to support election advertising.*



## **Circulating the Petition**

Petitions containing the name of not less than 5% of resident taxpayers must be presented to the city council or county commissioners. Get as many signatures as possible to avoid problems if some names are disqualified. More names also show support for the district.

- Petition carriers should be active supporters for the library. If possible, ask for help from people who are property owners, have good standing in the community, and understand the issues. Hold a meeting where both the library issues and the petition process are explained to petition carriers.
- Provide good written and oral instructions for petition carriers. Give the carriers these instructions to assure that the petitions will be correct and legal. Use the petition process as a public relations tool for the library.

### **Tips and instructions for petition carriers:**

- Petition signers must be registered voters within the area that will be voting on the mill levy. If the signer isn't sure whether they are a registered voter, recommend they not sign the petition until they verify their residency and voter registration.
- Signers must include their entire address, city and zip code and length of residence.
- Telephone numbers are optional. Carriers should explain this to signers and let signers know that the telephone numbers will only be used to remind the signer of the hearing and to vote at the election.
- Petition carriers should not allow anyone to sign for another person.
- Petition carriers must sign the bottom of the petition in the presence of a notary public and must have their signature notarized. This is extremely important, as *all names will be invalidated if the petition is not notarized.*

Have petition carriers turn in the petition to someone on the election committee or task force rather than the city or county clerk. The petitions can then be checked for flaws, etc. before they are officially turned in.

Once you have presented the petition to the city or county clerk they have 15 days to either reject the petition if it is insufficient or certify that the petition is sufficient.

## Getting Out the Vote

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Make up lists of supporters including names and phone numbers. Recruit volunteers to call these supporters immediately before the election or on Election Day itself to remind them to vote. You can use the petition as a formal list or make one of your own if you did not have to follow the petition process. Offer rides to those who cannot easily get to the polls. Obviously, you should make these preparations in advance of the election itself.

## Tips for the Mill Levy Campaign

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- Work to get local endorsements from groups like the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary Club, or other service organizations
- Ask community opinion leaders and library supporters to write letters to the editor.
- Speak with local service organizations about why the library needs the additional mills and how the money will benefit the community.
- Strive to get the attention of local news media – hopefully in a positive way
- Create a fact sheet that answers common questions
  - How many mills does the library need?
  - What will it cost the average taxpayer?
  - How will the money be used?
  - Compare the cost of the mill with other common purchases that people make like buying coffee or a hardback book.
- Be creative. For example one library created a coloring sheet for kids that said “Get Out to Vote.” The sky’s the limit when it comes to getting the word out to your community.