LWV Montana Library Study Guide

(September 30, 2026)

Introduction

Delegates attending the League of Women Voters of Montana (LWVMT) 2025 Annual Meeting voted to initiate a study of Montana libraries, focusing on how libraries exemplify democracy in action.

Montana's libraries are essential community institutions, providing free access to information, technology, educational opportunities, and civic engagement resources across a geographically vast and diverse state. From rural communities to Tribal Nations, libraries often serve as the only public spaces offering internet access, literacy programs, lifelong learning opportunities, and nonpartisan information for voters and families.

The members of the study committee are:

- Gerrie Beck, League of Women Voters of the Bozeman Area
- Beth Boyson, League of Women Voters of the Bozeman Area
- Cherri Jones, League of Women Voters of the Helena Area
- Bruce Newell, Helena, Retired Librarian
- Jennie Stapp, Helena, Librarian

At the national level, the League of Women Voters of the United States (LWVUS) has partnered with the American Library Association (ALA) through *A Guide to Civic Collaboration* (https://lwv.org/newsroom/press-releases/ala-and-lwv-release-civic-collaboration-guide).

Libraries and Leagues are among the few enduring, nonpartisan civic institutions that possess both community trust and strong local connections. Together, they encourage civil dialogue and informed discussion on issues that matter to their communities. Libraries and Leagues have a long history of working together to educate and empower voters, and that collaboration remains vital today.

In 2024, the American Library Association and the League of Women Voters launched a partnership to support local libraries in providing access to nonpartisan civic information and resources. Through the READER. VOTER. READY. initiative, libraries are equipped to engage voters and strengthen civic participation.

For decades, libraries and Leagues have collaborated on civic programs such as candidate forums, voter registration drives, media literacy and misinformation workshops, and Civic 101

programs. Providing welcoming public spaces for discussion, questions, and conversations about local issues is an important community service. Libraries and Leagues share the belief that knowledge empowers citizens and strengthens democracy.

The LWVUS Lacks a Position on Libraries

As noted, LWVUS and the ALA launched a partnership evidencing strong affinity between the League and libraries, but the LWVUS does not have a Position that allows Leagues to advocate on issues affecting libraries. Individual State Leagues have developed positions that reinforce the potential for the Montana League to adopt a Position on libraries.

The LWV of Michigan adopted a position on community libraries in 1988 that promotes, "A basic level of public library funding should insure basic services to all residents in Michigan."

In 2013, the Montgomery County, Maryland LWV adopted a position stating, "We support county libraries as a basic community service that should be publicly funded."

History of Libraries in the United States and Montana

In 1776, nearly every library in the United States was a private affair, accessible only to paying subscribers or members of exclusive societies. Two hundred and fifty years later, the country operates more than 17,000 public library systems serving virtually every community. That transformation was neither inevitable nor smooth; it required philanthropy on a massive scale, federal legislation, civil rights activism, and a professional infrastructure that did not exist until the late nineteenth century.

The tensions that shaped American libraries, who pays, who is served, what belongs on the shelf, remain active policy questions in 2026.

- https://www.mastersinlibraryscience.org/articles/history-of-american-libraries/
- https://www.igniteyourknowledge.com/the-history-and-impact-of-public-libraries/

History of Montana Libraries

From the gold-rush outposts of the 1860s to today's digital hubs, the history of Montana's libraries is a story of community efforts and insistence on an educated citizenry.

The movement began in Helena, where the territory's first library was founded in 1868. Like many frontier institutions, it started as a private subscription service, meaning you had to pay to play. This changed in 1883 when territorial legislators passed a law allowing towns to tax themselves for the sake of books. By 1886, Helena successfully established the first free public library in the Montana Territory, setting a precedent that cities like Billings, Butte, and Great Falls followed before the turn of the century.

Women's Clubs were the powerhouses behind library expansion. These organizations advocated for tax support in cities like Missoula and Red Lodge. Perhaps most impressively, by 1896, the

State Federation of Women's Clubs had organized "traveling libraries"—crates of books sent by wagon and rail to the state's most isolated corners.

The landscape of Montana libraries changed forever during the Carnegie Era (1901–1922). Philanthropist Andrew Carnegie issued 17 grants to Montana towns, providing more than $200,000 for construction. These buildings became architectural anchors of their communities; while early designs featured grand domes and columns, later versions adopted the practical "Carnegie Classic" brick style. Today, nine of these original buildings still serve their communities as active libraries.

As the state matured, so did its libraries. The University of Montana and Montana State University opened their collections in the mid-1890s, while the 1915 authorization of county libraries allowed for expansion beyond city limits. By 1929, the Montana State Library Commission was established to coordinate services statewide.

Today, Montana's libraries have shifted from being mere book repositories to essential high-tech community hubs that meet contemporary needs. While their historic brick-and-mortar foundations remain, they now serve as "digital lifelines" in a state where geographical distance is a constant challenge.

As of 2026, Montana's diverse library network includes:

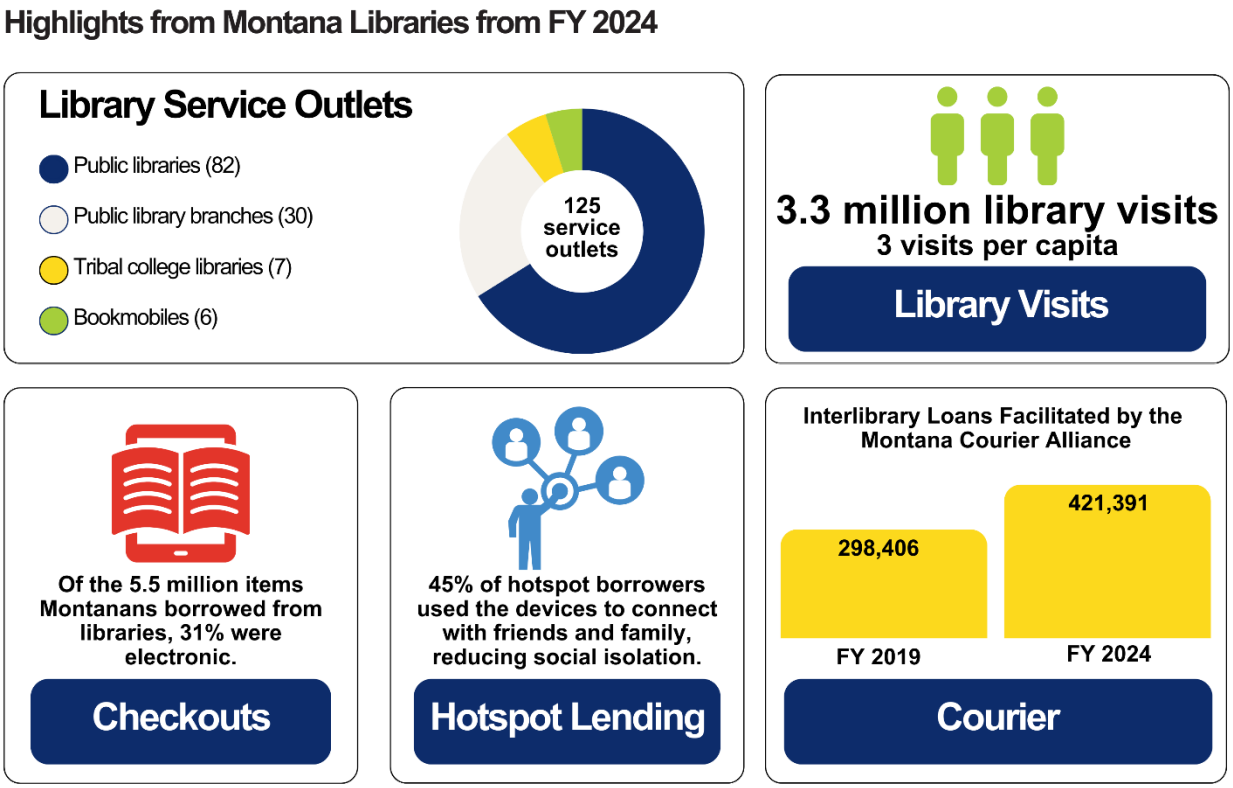
- **Eighty-two Public Libraries and Library Systems:** These systems operate through 123 physical locations, including 30 branch libraries and seven bookmobiles.
- **Seven Tribal College Libraries:** These institutions are increasingly vital, with four that currently meet public library standards to receive state funds to support public library services.
- **Twenty-four Academic Institutions:** Through the Treasure State Academic Information & Library Services (TRAILS) consortium, 24 institutions—including all Montana University System campuses, seven tribal colleges, and four private colleges—share resources (https://www.trailsmt.org/members).
- **Six hundred School Libraries:** These serve K-12 students across the state's rural and urban districts.

These libraries provide a number of critical services to meet the needs of Montanans. They:

- **Bridge the digital divide:** Libraries are often the only source of free, high-speed internet in rural areas. They provide mobile hotspots to patrons, allowing residents to access telehealth, search for jobs, or complete schoolwork from home.
- **Serve as a community hub:** Libraries remain popular; in 2024, Montanans visited public and tribal college libraries 3.3 million times, a figure that rivals annual visits to the state's park system.
- **Provide resources to all:** The Montana Library Network allows a resident in a tiny town like Twin Bridges to access the same 5.5 million items as someone in Billings through a statewide courier and a shared digital catalog and digital collections.

- **Support lifelong learning:** Today's libraries host over 350,000 attendees annually for educational programs, ranging from early literacy "story times" to virtual workshops on niche local topics like rockhounding.
- **Assist with cultural preservation:** Tribal college libraries are leading efforts to recover and preserve Indigenous languages and oral histories, using mobile recording studios to capture stories that were nearly lost.

From those first small collections to the modern, glass-walled facilities of the 21st century, Montana's libraries have evolved from luxury subscription services to essential public resources, providing citizens with free access to knowledge and entertainment and supporting lifelong learning for all.



Infographic from Montana State Library website: https://msl.mt.gov/2025-Legislative-Session

Sources:

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- Montana Historical Society/Historic Montana/Carnegie Libraries; accessed 2/3/2026.
  - https://historicmt.org/tours/show/4
- Yellowstone Public Radio, “New Book Chronicles Montana's Carnegie Libraries” by Kay Erickson, Sept. 9, 2019.
  - https://www.ypradio.org/arts-culture/2019-09-09/new-book-chronicles-montanas-carnegie-libraries
- History of the Mansfield Library; accessed 2/3/2026.
  - https://www.umt.edu/library/about/history/
- History of the Great Falls Library by Kathy Mora, 2024; accessed 2/3/2026.
  - https://greatfallslibrary.org/history-of-the-library/
- Montana State Library, Commission and State Library History, Accessed 2/04/2026.
  - https://msl.mt.gov/_docs/MSL_CommissionHistory2023.pdf
- Montana State Library, 2025 Legislative Session, Legislative Night Handouts; accessed 2/04/2026.
  - https://msl.mt.gov/2025-Legislative-Session
- Montana State Library Annual Report; accessed 2/04/2026.
  - https://msl.mt.gov/about/publications/about-the-library/MSL_AnnualReport_FY25.pdf

Types of Libraries in Montana

Public Libraries

Per the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS), a public library is established under state enabling laws or regulations to serve a community, district, or region, and provides at least the following:

1. an organized collection of printed or other library materials, or a combination thereof;
2. paid staff;
3. an established schedule in which services of the staff are available to the public;
4. the facilities necessary to support such a collection, staff, and schedule, and
5. is supported in whole or in part with public funds.

There are currently 82 Public Libraries and Library Systems, operating through 123 physical locations, including 30 branch libraries and seven bookmobiles. Four Tribal College Libraries currently meet public library standards to receive state funds to support public library services.

Public libraries exist to serve entire communities by providing free, equitable access to knowledge and resources, regardless of age, income, or background. They exist to educate, connect, and empower communities by providing free access to information, technology, and shared cultural spaces.

Public libraries:

- Offer free and open access to information, supporting literacy, lifelong learning, and digital inclusion.
- Function as community hubs, hosting cultural programs, educational events, and social activities that strengthen local engagement.
- Strengthen the workforce, providing essential services such as technology access and training, job seeking support, and workshops for entrepreneurs.
- Promote community wellbeing, education, recreation, and social inclusion—goals that remain central to the modern public library mission.

Academic Libraries

Academic libraries encompass research libraries, baccalaureate, masters and doctoral degree granting institutions, junior and community colleges, and distance learning programs of higher education. The Montana University System is comprised of sixteen public colleges and universities. There are seven tribal colleges in Montana, four of which have received some funding from the State Library to support their public-library type services. Within the state there are 24 academic institutions. As stated above, through the TRAILS consortium, 24 institutions—including all Montana University System campuses, seven tribal colleges, and four private colleges—share resources.

Academic libraries support the teaching, learning, and research missions of higher education institutions. They enable rigorous scholarship and instruction by delivering specialized resources, research support, and expert guidance.

Academic libraries:

- Provide scholarly resources—books, academic journals, databases—selected to meet the curriculum and research needs of students and faculty.
- Serve as centers for intellectual engagement, offering study spaces, collaborative environments, and research skill development.
- Strengthen research productivity by offering expert search services, interlibrary loan, research consultations, and information literacy instruction.
- Preserve and organize knowledge, occupying a central role in higher education's mission of discovery and dissemination.

Tribal College Libraries

Tribal college libraries serve as academic libraries and also serve Native communities by supporting cultural preservation, language revitalization, self-determination, and access to information. They protect and promote Indigenous culture, knowledge, language, and sovereignty while offering essential information services. Montana has seven tribal college libraries, four of which currently meet public library standards to receive state funds to support public library services.

In addition to serving as academic libraries, Montana tribal college libraries:

- Act as cultural and knowledge centers, preserving Indigenous histories, languages, stories, and traditions.
- Promote sovereignty and self-determination, supporting community needs and Indigenous approaches to knowledge.
- Provide library services tailored to tribal communities, often combining archives, museums, and community learning spaces.
- Function as vital, community institutions, hosting unique cultural resources and supporting education.

School Libraries

K-12 libraries serve as essential learning hubs that foster literacy, critical thinking, and equitable access to information resources for students and staff. They promote a love of reading, support curriculum integration, teach information literacy, and provide safe, inclusive, and technologically advanced environments designed for academic and personal growth. Montana has 600 school libraries that serve K-12 students in urban and rural areas.

School libraries:

- Provide diverse materials—both physical and digital—that directly support classroom instruction and academic growth, including, but not limited to, reading for pleasure.
- Help students develop Information Literacy and Research Skills: Under the guidance of certified librarians, students learn to effectively locate, evaluate, and use information, developing essential research skills for the 21st century.
- Foster literacy and reading habits s through access to a wide range of, and diverse, literature.

- Serve as hubs for digital learning, teaching students how to safely navigate digital spaces and providing access to technology, such as computers and coding resources.
- Provide equal, free access to resources and technology for all students, ensuring all learners, regardless of background, have the tools to succeed.
- Offer a safe environment for inquiry, collaboration, and individual study, encouraging students to explore personal interests and develop as individuals.
- Help students develop critical thinking through exposure to diverse viewpoints and media.

Montana State Library

The Montana State Library supports state government agencies by preserving and providing access to government information, assisting state agencies with research needs, and strengthening statewide library services that help carry out governmental priorities. The mission of the Montana State Library is to help "all organizations, communities, and Montanans thrive through excellent library resources and services."

The state library will:

- Oversee preservation and access to state government information, ensuring that government publications, historical materials, and agency records remain available to officials, researchers, and the public.
- Provide statewide leadership, governance, and coordination for all types of libraries (public, academic, school, and special), ensuring consistent quality of library service across the state.
- Develop and implement statewide library policies, standards, and guidelines that shape how libraries operate and deliver services.
- Manage and distribute state and federal library funding, ensuring resources reach local libraries equitably and strategically.
- Provide consulting, training, and continuing education for library staff statewide, strengthening skills in areas such as technology, management, literacy services, and library administration.
- Support statewide infrastructure and shared services, including database licensing, interlibrary cooperation, technology support, and connectivity initiatives.
- Conduct statewide evaluation, research, and data collection to assess library performance, guide improvement efforts, and inform state. level decision making.
- Advocate for libraries at the state level, raising awareness of their impact and representing library interests in government and public discussions.

In addition to the Montana State Library, other state agency libraries that provide services to the citizens of Montana include the Montana Historical Society Library and Archives, the Montana Department of Transportation Library, and the State Law Library of Montana.
For further information:

- American Library Association/LibGuides/Definition of a Library/General Definition https://libguides.ala.org/library-definition#:~:text=in%20library%20literature.-,Public%20Libraries,in%20part%20with%20public%20funds.

- American Association of School Librarians, Role of the School Library https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/AASL_Role_of_the_School_Library.pdf

- Causality: School Libraries & Student Success (CLASS) White Paper, American Association of School Librarians National Resource Forum, 2014. https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/CLASSWhitePaper_FINAL.pdf

- Elementary and Secondary Education Act & Libraries, American Library Association https://www.ala.org/advocacy/school-libraries/essa#:~:text=back%20to%20top-,Why%20are%20school%20libraries%20important?,component%20of%20a%20student's%20education.

- American Indian Library Association. https://ailanet.org/

- Defining Quality Library Services and Evaluation Resources for Public Libraries: A Literature Review for State Library Services. https://oai.issuelab.org/resources/39286/39286.pdf

- *It s Not What Libraries Hold; It s Who Libraries Serve: Seeking a User-Centered Future for Academic Libraries*, January 23, 2020. https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/its-not-what-libraries-hold-its-who-libraries-serve/ Gwen Evans, Roger C. Schonfeld

- Himmel, Ethel E., William James Wilson, and GraceAnne A., DeCandido. *The Functions and Roles of State Library Agencies*. Chicago, Ill: American Library Association, 2000.

- International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions IFLA Professional Reports, No. 106. “Guidelines for Libraries of Government Departments.” Government Libraries Section and the Government Information and Official Publications Section, Edited by Nancy Bolt and Suzanne Burge. https://www.ifla.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/assets/hq/publications/professional-report/106.pdf

- Montana State Library, 2025 Legislative Session, Legislative Night Handouts; accessed 2/04/2026. https://msl.mt.gov/2025-Legislative-Session

- Montana State Library Annual Report; accessed 2/04/2026. https://msl.mt.gov/about/publications/about-the-library/MSL_AnnualReport_FY25.pdf

Library Funding in Montana

Knowing how libraries raise and spend money is essential to understanding them. All told, Montana publicly funded libraries spend more than $102 million each year. That's a lot of money, but remember that we're talking about more than 800 libraries serving 1.1 million people. Montana public entities spend over $30 billion yearly for local and state government (including on schools and higher education). $102 million amounts to 00.34% (about a third of one percent) of Montanans' total yearly public spending.

While it's useful to parse the way different types of libraries get and spend money, let's remember that for most of our users, a library is a library is a library. Our users use different types of libraries, for different purposes, at different times in their lives.

Montana libraries serve as a tag team, supporting learning, promoting happiness, and providing Montanans a continuum of library services for every chapter of their lives. The two articles below provide more detail on library funding in Montana.

- https://montanansforlibraries.org/your-work-matters-february-2026/
- https://msl.mt.gov/about/publications/Federal-Library-Funds-at-Work

For further information on how our libraries are funded, see: https://msl.mt.gov/2025-Legislative-Session. Scroll to the bottom of the page to see "Montana Public Library Revenue by Source."

Challenges Facing Montana Libraries

In recent years, Montana libraries have faced a variety of resource challenges, including:

- **Funding instability** resulting from local property tax limitations, inconsistent city and county support, changing cost structures, and rising operational expenses.
- **Increasing digital content costs**, as a growing portion of library materials are licensed, leased, or rented rather than owned.
- **Digital access gaps** in rural areas where broadband connectivity remains limited.
- **Evolving community needs**, including expanded roles in community resilience, media literacy, digital literacy, and civic education.

As a nonpartisan organization committed to democracy and informed participation, the League of Women Voters of Montana is well-positioned to study these issues and consider how libraries support civic engagement throughout the state.

Purpose of the LWV Montana Library Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the current status, challenges, and opportunities facing Montana libraries, including public, academic, school, special, and other publicly funded libraries. The Study Guide explores how libraries contribute to democracy, civic engagement, education, and community well-being, to help determine how the League can best support these institutions. This study will promote understanding of the role libraries play in supporting informed communities and potentially give Leagues a Position from which to advocate for libraries. The study will also help ensure that League members understand the importance of maintaining adequate and sustainable funding for library services.

The goal of a LWV study of public libraries in Montana is to reaffirm to League members the importance of libraries in our communities in their mission of providing equal access to information. In a democracy, people need access to free and unbiased facts.

Public libraries are fundamental to a healthy democratic society.

- Libraries support free speech.
- Libraries encourage civic engagement.
- Libraries empower individuals to make informed decisions to be able to participate in civic life.
- Libraries uphold privacy rights and protect intellectual freedom.

Library Study Process

Each local League will make this Study Guide available to its members encouraging them to read the Study Guide and linked materials, then hold a membership meeting to discuss the study questions and consider consensus with the draft proposed position. Results of each local League's consensus discussion will be sent to the Study Committee, who will, if consensus is reached, prepare a report to the Board containing the results and a proposed Position for adoption by the LWVMT board at the board meeting in January, 2027. (See Appendix A)

Discussion Questions for Local Leagues

1. What do you see as the role of libraries in supporting democracy in Montana?

2. Do you think that a public library system is a basic community service? Why or why not?

3. What community services should libraries provide?

4. Should public library services and resources be free and accessible to all persons?

5. Review the proposed Position below and determine whether there is consensus to support the Position, noting any changes suggested that increase consensus support.

Proposed LWV Montana Position on Libraries

The League of Women Voters of Montana supports publicly funded libraries as essential community services. The League supports a public library system that is adequately funded and accessible to all individuals, recognizing the importance of libraries in promoting informed participation in democracy. The League supports full-service library systems in Montana communities, Montana school libraries, Montana academic institutions, and Montana Tribal College libraries.

Proposed Position Components:

Funding
Support long-term, stable, and adequate funding for public libraries to ensure they can effectively serve their communities.

Access
Support universal access to library services, recognizing libraries as vital sources of knowledge and information.

Collection Development
Support broad, diverse, and regularly updated collections that meet the evolving needs of communities. Library staff, operating in the best interests of their communities can make professional decisions about selection, organization, preservation, and dissemination of resources, services and technologies without political interference.

Civic Engagement
Recognize libraries as critical civic infrastructure that provides programs and services fostering community engagement and informed participation.

-- End of proposed Position --

Rationale: The League's position emphasizes the importance of stable and adequate funding for public libraries and access for all individuals. Such access is essential for informed and active participation in a democratic society.

Additional Briefing Materials

- Key Principles of Libraries in Montana
  https://msl.mt.gov/libraries/Montana-Library-Network

- Funding Libraries in Montana: https://msl.mt.gov/about/publications/about-the-library/2025_StateAid.pdf

- Libraries as Freedom of Expression
  https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill
  https://www.lwv.org/blog/leagues-libraries-and-informing-voters

- Research on Effectiveness of Libraries
  "The Returns to Public Library Investment." *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*. See both the Abstract, p. 1 and the Conclusion, pp. 31-32.

Appendix A: Process for League of Women Voters of Montana Adoption of Positions

What is a Position? A League of Women Voters Position is a statement of policy and belief that has been researched, discussed by the membership, and had a consensus form that supported the statement. The League does not react to situations and issues, we respond from Positions that have been researched, vetted and agreed to by the membership. This is a grass-roots process that allows League leadership to speak for the membership, and empowers the membership to determine where and how the League can take Action.

The Position Adoption Process and Democracy: The League believes that its members have the ability to learn about an issue, discuss the values and full ramifications of the issue, and come to consensus on a Position statement. Then, if a consensus is present, this will allow the League to take Action.

Each League can rely on the Positions of the level of League above it, as the members of the lower League were involved at some point in adopting the Position, either through a study process or through a convention. A League can study and adopt its own Positions as long as they do not conflict with those of the higher-level League(s).

Some areas of policy are specific to the local level. Some are specific to the state level, and some are specific to the national level. Some issues span all levels of the League.

Steps of the Position Adoption Process

The state League engages in a Study when there is no Position already adopted at the national level. There are two ways to do this:

1. **Study and consensus process** – A committee of the state League

- broadly researches an issue, prepares a Study Guide containing: the research it has found; questions for discussion for League members having read the research; and perhaps a proposed Position for consideration by League members.

- Local League members dedicate one or more meetings of the local League to learn about the issue, discuss the questions, and arrive at consensus, if possible, on a potential Position.

- Results of each local League's discussion, review of the proposed Position, degree of consensus and areas of suggested changes are then sent to the Committee who prepare a final report to the state board containing the results from each local League and, if a consensus was reached, a revised draft Position reflecting the feedback from local Leagues.

- The state Board reviews the final report and adopts the Position that reflects the consensus of the local League discussions, if there is one.

2. **Concurrence process** – A committee locates an existing Position that has been adopted by another League that embodies the language that addresses the issue. NOTE: in a concurrence, the language of the Position cannot be changed, except in so far as the Position uses the name of the League in its language.

   The committee:

   - proposes that the state League "concur" with this existing Position, and includes research and information from the other League as well as Montana-specific research and information that help League members understand the issue.

   - Local Leagues dedicated one member meeting to discuss the research and the issue, and determine if there is broad support to concur with the existing Position of another League.

   - Results of these discussions go to the Committee, who prepare a report to the state board including the reports from each local League, and whether there is agreement to concur with the existing League Position.

   - The state Board reviews the final report and adopts the Position that reflects the concurrence of the local Leagues discussions, if there is one.