

VIRGINIA

# Public libraries are the latest front in culture war battle over books



By [Gregory S. Schneider](#)

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FRONT ROYAL, Va. — Melody Hotek watched the library board room filling up and knew she was in for a tough night. Soon every seat was taken and people lined the walls, some 120 in total, with two sheriff's deputies on hand for any trouble.

“This is quite a crowd, and I am nervous,” Hotek said into the microphone as she convened her first meeting as chairwoman of the Samuels Public Library trustees. In the two years she'd been a member of the board, the 70-year-old grandmother was used to quiet sessions with zero spectators.

Now the crowd was buzzing and jittery. A few months earlier, a handful of residents had begun demanding the removal of certain books in the children's section of Warren County's only public library. Most of the titles involved LGBTQ+ themes. Powered by support from conservative media, the group persuaded the county's Board of Supervisors in June to withhold 75 percent of the library's funding until something was done to address the complaints.

At the July 10 trustees meeting where Hotek began her term as chairwoman, residents on both sides of the issue had turned out to see how the library would respond. The clock was ticking. Samuels Public Library had only enough money to operate through September unless it could persuade the county to release the rest.

The situation in Front Royal, about 70 miles west of Washington at the northern end of the Shenandoah Valley, marks an escalation of book wars in Virginia and across the country. In recent years, clashes over whether to ban books — part of a national movement of parental grievance against cultural change in education — have largely played out in school libraries in [Texas](#), [Florida](#), [Georgia](#), [Pennsylvania](#) and Virginia. Now the issue is spreading to public libraries, too.

In Virginia, the Pamunkey Regional Library outside Richmond has faced challenges from residents who want to remove or restrict books they consider sexually explicit. The Hanover County Board of Supervisors, which supplies most of the library's budget, has appointed two library critics to the regional board and is debating funding cuts. In Appomattox County near Lynchburg, supervisors [fired a library board member](#) last month over a gay pride display. And in Botetourt County outside Roanoke, community members began flooding the local library with requests to remove books, but the county's Board of Supervisors recently [passed a resolution in support](#) of the library.

“Seeing it jump into the public library from schools ... was sort of staggering,” said Lisa Varga, executive director of the Virginia Library Association. Public libraries serve a broad function in society, she said — they assist job hunters and new English speakers, help grandparents digitize family photos, give kids a safe place to hang out on a summer day.

“The public library's ability to provide resources that cater to every member of the community is just part of our core values,” Varga said, “and these are under question right now.”

Not just under question. In Front Royal, the library's opponents accuse it of terrible violations of the social order, of sexualizing and brainwashing children. Bearing the brunt of the anger is the library's staff and its 15-member, all-volunteer Board of Trustees, who include a retired Air Force general, a lawyer, an accountant, parents, grandparents, churchgoers and home-schoolers.

At the recent meeting, as anger boiled over in the crowd and one speaker furiously thrust his hand toward the face of a woman who had been heckling him, Hotek pleaded for calm.

“We're all neighbors,” she said. “And this is our community, so let's be kind to each other. Please.”

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Exactly what set off the issue in Front Royal is unclear.

By one account, as [told in a publication](#) of the conservative Family Research Council, a woman's 4-year-old grandson visited the library earlier this year and saw a sexually explicit book in the children's section that the grandmother found appalling.

That story could not be corroborated; the person who described it in the FRC publication, Thomas Hinnant, declined to answer questions from a Washington Post reporter. The library's supporters insist the tale is apocryphal.

Hotek said she first got word about trouble in February, when a county supervisor alerted her that local resident Mark Egger was raising complaints. Egger, 67, a piano teacher, said in an interview that he believes there is a national trend of books related to gay and transgender issues being aimed at children and decided to take a look at Samuels.

“I knew these books were coming into the library, and I just hadn’t had time to research it. I finally got the time back at the end of January,” Egger said. He added that he knows about the industry from having owned a bookstore years ago. “It’s been a huge push from the publishers and the librarians to get these books in — books that say a boy can become a girl and a girl can become a boy.”

His family wasn’t directly exposed to the books — Egger said he has lived in Front Royal 32 years and has five grown children and seven grandchildren, though most do not live in the area. But Egger views the topics as inherently wrong.

“I wasn’t focusing on anything but books that had sexual perversity in it ... and books that promoted the lie of transgenderism,” he said.

In April, he filed formal complaints against three titles — “I Am Jazz,” a picture book about Jazz Jennings, a trans woman who writes she was “born with a girl’s brain in a boy’s body”; “This Is Why They Hate Us,” a young adult novel about a bisexual Latino boy; and “Ana on the Edge,” about a figure skater coming to terms with gender identity.

Egger was soon joined by fellow worshipers from his local Catholic church. A conservative religious community has grown in Front Royal in recent years, with nearby Christendom College and several home-schooling groups as focal points. The town is also a haven for outdoorsy free spirits — it’s a gateway to the Appalachian Trail, Skyline Drive and Shenandoah River rafting — and cultures sometimes clash, such as a few years ago when the town lifted a long-standing ban on tarot cards.

In May, a website called Clean Up Samuels Library began rallying residents to what it said was an urgent cause.

“Christ told us to be ‘cunning as serpents, and innocent as doves,’” an [early version](#) of the site said, inviting concerned residents to a “Beer, Babysitting, and Cleaning Up the Samuels Library” event in a local park. “Right now, innocence is under attack at our local Samuels Library. Explicitly pornographic ‘young adult’ books, as well as books that promote fetishes such as the LGBTQ+ ideology have been found in the children’s and young adults sections of the library.”

The site provided instructions for signing up for a library card and filling out forms to object to individual books. After the event in the park, book “reconsideration” requests began flooding into the library — 590 in the month of May. The previous month saw seven requests.

Each request takes three to four weeks to process, as staffers read the books and follow a protocol of checking them against national reviews and library policies, Samuels Public Library Director Michelle Ross said. Any appeal of the library’s decision would take another four weeks.

“We’re still working on those initial seven” complaints, she said.

Swamping librarians with multiple reconsideration requests is a new phenomenon in Virginia, said Varga, the state library association president, who is watching Front Royal closely. “Having an event to fill out as many forms as possible paralyzes all other library services,” Varga said.

The requests targeted 134 books and were filed by 53 individuals. In dozens of complaint forms obtained by a library supporter through the Freedom of Information Act and shared with The Post, almost all filers said they had not read the books, only summaries. The overwhelming majority of the complaints reviewed by The Post singled out LGBTQ+ themes as the reason for removal.

“Our library should not be carrying ANY material about LGBT,” one form read. Another listed “homosexual content” as the reason for removal; “LGBT lifestyle,” said another; “abnormal sexuality treated like it’s normal”; and on and on.

The organizers of Clean Up Samuels Library are not identified on the website. Egger disputed that the movement is any kind of formal group, but said it’s far bigger than many realize. “There’s literally thousands of people on our side,” he said. In interviews with conservative media, Hinnant has served as a spokesman.

“What these folks have been pushing in our library is absolutely disgusting,” Hinnant told Brian Kilmeade last month on Fox News. “We’re going to seize this library and give it back to the people and back to the parents through community action.”

When approached by a Post reporter outside the library after the recent trustees meeting, Hinnant declined to elaborate. “I don’t talk to the fake news,” he said as a reporter from the Breitbart website took video of the exchange. When asked about the Clean Up Samuels Library group, Hinnant said his only comment was that “I’m a community organizer; I don’t have official association with any organization.”

From February through May, Hinnant had an official role with the political campaign of Delores Oates, a member of the Warren County Board of Supervisors who is running for a House of Delegates seat as a Republican. She paid him \$20,000 in consulting fees. Oates did not respond to requests for comment.

The Board of Supervisors confronted the issue for the first time on June 6, when the Clean Up Samuels crowd turned out in force for a public hearing. By then the library’s defenders had begun to coalesce, and both sides spoke for hours in a fiery session that ended near midnight.

Samuels Public Library is a private nonprofit, so the county supervisors have no say over the library trustees. But they do have power over its budget; the county contributes at least 80 percent of the library’s operating funds, or some \$1 million per year. A week after that June public hearing, the board approved a county budget for the fiscal year beginning July 1 and took a surprise 4-1 vote to release only 25 percent of the library’s funding.

The rest would be held in reserve until September, to see how the library would respond to the concerns.

The budget vote was “a huge victory,” Clean Up Samuels Library posted on its website. “We thank the Lord for all the blessings He has given us thus far.”

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Sydney Patton, an organizer of the rival group Save Samuels Library, said she has volunteered at the library for years. “Some people call me the ‘goth librarian,’” she joked, in reference to her penchant for black lipstick and clothes.

“During covid, the library helped me keep my sanity,” said Patton, 38, who has worked in cybersecurity and belongs to a local LGBTQ+ collective.

She sees the anti-book crusade as a political tactic, noting that numerous local candidates for state office used the June supervisors meeting to hand out campaign literature. “This isn’t actually a thing about caring about children; it’s to rile up the base, and we’re being used as a pawn,” Patton said. “This has divided our community. It’s hate. It’s toxic.”

The books in the library are there to speak to the most vulnerable children, she said — those confused about their identities who might have nowhere to turn and don’t understand their own feelings. Seeing themselves reflected in a book could be life-affirming, she said.

No one is forcing any child to read them, Patton added — and, in fact, children under 12 are required to be accompanied by an adult while in the library. Her group has amassed more than 18,400 signatures on a [Change.org petition](#) to defend the library’s policies.

“Knowledge is power,” said Stevi Hubbard, 43, a local Realtor, parent and supporter of the library. “I have a right to raise my child my way. This is a public library.” She wore a shirt that said, “Censored speech is not free speech — hold fast.”

The American Civil Liberties Union of Virginia is monitoring such cases around the state, said policy and legislative counsel Breanna Diaz. “What has essentially been a national trend has become a trend in Virginia, as well,” she said.

Its roots in the state go back about two years, Diaz said. Gov. Glenn Youngkin (R) was elected in 2021 after a campaign built on the slogan “Parents Matter” that drew energy from a conservative backlash against local school boards. Republicans also won control of the House of Delegates that year, lending momentum to the ideological shift.

In 2022, the General Assembly took up Senate Bill 656, requiring the state to develop model policies for local school systems to notify parents of any sexually explicit materials used in classrooms and creating a mechanism for their child to opt out. Two Democratic senators from conservative districts joined all Republicans in the Senate to pass the bill, which cleared the Republican-controlled House on a party-line vote and was signed into law by Youngkin.

The policy is having a “chilling effect” on library-related issues around the state, Diaz said. “Pro-book-ban individuals and organizations are emboldened by this law to now extend it into public libraries,” she said.

Which, on a Monday night in July, engulfed the meeting room at Samuels Public Library in Front Royal.

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Though both sides had arrived primed for battle, the rules of the library trustees imposed limitations: only five speakers total, for three minutes each.

Shouting broke out as soon as one of the book opponents tried to divide her time with another speaker. It reached a fever pitch when Egger took the microphone. He wanted extra time. He argued with hecklers. He slammed the American Library Association for removing the name of “Little House on the Prairie” author Laura Ingalls Wilder from its children’s book award because she wasn’t “woke enough.”

“Maybe if her book was called ‘The Little Transgender Fairy on the Prairie,’ they would have kept her name on the award,” he said, to laughter and angry shouts that were equally thunderous.

Resident Tina Johnson, 49, followed, saying she had spent 20 years working with children as a behavioral therapist. She pointed out that banned books disproportionately feature minorities and marginalized people.

“Banning books is not about books. Banning books is about people,” she said. “It’s about telling some children in our community their family is perverse and unwelcome. ... Samuels is just one library, in our little county, but it is the front line, as is every library being targeted right now by systematic attacks on the First Amendment.”

Soon it was time for action, and the library board rolled out several steps in response to the public controversy.

Ross, the library director, had prepared a plan to implement two new kinds of library cards — one for young children allowing them to check out only juvenile books, the other for children up to age 16 allowing them to check out young adult books. The cards would not be required for those age groups, but parents could opt in.

In addition, the library would create a “new adult” section for books aimed at ages 16 through college, making it easier for parents to keep younger children away from mature themes. The board also voted to spend a total of \$25,000 — out of contributed funds, not taxpayer money — to hire legal counsel and a public relations adviser to handle the controversy.

But when it came to three specific books objected to by Egger — the first of the wave of objections to reach the final stage of the process — the board was making few changes. It agreed to move “This Is Why They Hate Us” to the “new adult” section as part of the reorganization but declined to make any changes for the other two books.

Library staff members argued that the books all are well-reviewed and meet established criteria that govern how books are chosen. Two board members dissented.

“I think Samuels Library is a great library,” one of them, trustee Pete Walker, said before voting against the books. “But I’ll admit I have some concerns about how we’re handling this controversy. I believe it’s wrong to sexualize our children.”

Egger was so livid over the final vote that a deputy had to ask him to quiet down. Egger walked out to the lobby, where he said the library’s system for reviewing books was rigged against ever taking objections seriously. And the introduction of restrictive library cards?

“It’s just a diversion,” he said.

The bigger question remained whether those actions would be enough to get the Board of Supervisors to release funding.

One supervisor, Jerome K. “Jay” Butler, attended the meeting and said afterward that he was encouraged.

“I think they’re taking steps in the right direction,” he said. “We’ll just have to see. I’ll talk to the other board members and see what their consensus is.”

None of the other four supervisors responded to The Post’s requests for comment. Oates, the supervisor who is running for the House of Delegates seat, posted an essay to an online Catholic civic group that said the library was still out of line.

“I support the removal of pornographic literature and severing ties with the ALA,” Oates wrote. Most of the library board “should be replaced by new members who care about the well-being of children. ... We set an example for the rest of the country to follow — residents using their political power to demand accountability from government officials taking cues from the radical left.”

So the fate of Samuels Public Library remains up in the air as the September deadline looms.

“I think we’re optimistic that they’ll put our funding back,” Hotek, the trustee chairwoman, said in an interview. “We’re making good compromises that are good for the parents and good for the community.”

But moving books around will have to be enough. Banning them — removing books that the library’s trained professionals have determined to be in the interest of even a small number of people in the community — that can’t happen, Hotek said.

“I have no agenda,” she said. “I’m a grandmother of nine. I go in with my children and my grandchildren, and when they pick out books we look at them before they check them out. This is what parents do.”