

County Executive Steuart Pittman declares Anne Arundel County a 'book sanctuary.'



capitalgazette.com/2024/09/25/county-executive-steuart-pittman-declares-anne-arundel-county-public-a-book-sanctuary-heres-what-that-means

Bridget Byrne

September 25, 2024

At an event Wednesday where the Anne Arundel County Public Library System declared itself a “book sanctuary,” County Executive Steuart Pittman took it a step further, declaring all of Anne Arundel County a “book sanctuary.”

At the Annapolis Mall library, in front of a display featuring books that have been challenged across the country — ranging from the children’s books “Where the Wild Things Are” to Zora Neale Hurston’s “Their Eyes Were Watching God” — Pittman spoke about the designation.

“While some seek to block books they disagree with, our library system is stepping up to ensure that all voices, all stories, and all perspectives are protected,” said Pittman. “This designation is a statement about our commitment to intellectual freedom and access to knowledge for everyone.”

Book sanctuaries, an idea that started in Chicago in 2022, are places that collect and protect books considered endangered to make them broadly accessible. They also host talks and events, offering education on the history of book banning and burning.

Anne Arundel County Public Library’s Board of Library Trustees voted last week to name AACPL a book sanctuary, the first in Maryland.

“The reasons [for banning books] don’t represent what the whole county thinks,” said Margot Argeles, student member of the AACPL Board of Library Trustees and a senior at Severna Park. “I saw what the board was doing and I wanted to be active.”

The move coincides with nationwide Banned Books Week, an annual event that started in 1982 in response to a surge in challenges to books.

In the last five years, Maryland public libraries have also experienced a 600% increase in staff threats and 11 bomb threats related to this issue, according to AACPL. In 2023, public libraries saw a 92% increase in titles targeted for removal, with more than 4,200 unique titles challenged or banned, according to the American Library Association.

Pittman was joined by Delegate Dana Jones, Annapolis Mayor Gavin Buckley, Maryland State Librarian Morgan Miller, AACPL CEO Skip Auld and Hoboken Public Library Director Jennie Pu, who established 34 book sanctuaries in New Jersey.

Jones authored the Freedom to Read Act, which passed in April and requires school and county library officials to adopt state standards developed by the Maryland State Library Board.

“So many of my colleagues were shocked at the scale and severity of the banning attempts,” said Jones on Wednesday. “Book banning is not an issue happening elsewhere — attempts have been happening not just in our state but right here in Anne Arundel County.”

There have been five formal and five informal challenges in Anne Arundel County since 2019, targeting the books “Lawn Boy,” “Gender Queer,” “Bye-Bye Binary,” “Our Colonial Year,” “Who Was Fidel Castro?,” and “The Blackbird Girls.” All are accessible at AACPL or through Maryland’s InterLibrary Loan program.

Pittman ended his remarks by addressing critics of book sanctuaries.

"I want to say to the people who think this is an effort to be 'woke' and fit into a political category: It's not. This is about freedom of information," said Pittman. "Never will we allow a small group within us to prevent the rest of us from reading books."

After the remarks, the officials and librarians hosted a story time where they read "Grandad's Camper," a book about two gay grandparents that has been challenged and banned across the country.