

Assembly Standing Committee on Libraries and Education Technology

Public Hearing on Funding Public Libraries | January 10, 2018

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Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee.

I have the privilege of working with 66 public libraries in the Hudson Valley of New York and the 619,000 residents of Columbia, Dutchess, Greene, Putnam and Ulster counties. Part of the work I do on behalf of New York State is the administration of the State Aid for Library Construction Program. I have served in this role for more than fifteen years. We have been able to fund projects large and small from brand new construction, to expansion projects that have created new meeting spaces and children's rooms to renovations that retrofit existing space to accommodate modern technology to energy efficiency projects that reduce long-term operating costs of library facilities. Each one was critically important to ensure residents have safe, clean, accessible learning spaces in their local community.

In the Mid-Hudson Library System, which encompasses five (5) of the sixty-two (62) counties in New York State, there is an estimated need of close to \$30 million. That number likely sounds familiar to you as it is the same number we are advocating for this year for the *entire* State Aid for Library Construction program. That amount, again: based on the reports from 66 of the 756 public libraries in this state, should give us pause. The total need in our state is in excess of \$1.7 billion. With a "b."

Under the Education Commissioner's Regulations §90.2 section 8, library trustees of this state are charged with ensuring the provision of quality library services in *facilities that meet the needs of the community they serve*.

This work begins with the stewardship of the assets we already have, which is no small task in the historic region served by the Mid-Hudson Library System, we have some of the longest public library history in the state in our System, with libraries being formed in the mid-1800s, facilities chosen over two hundred years ago, understandably, do not speak to the needs presented in modern society for library service. Our oldest facility, which houses a portion of the Stone Ridge Public Library, was built in 1798. Our newest facility, is not quite open to the public yet but will be soon, the Highland Public Library opens this month. Here's a snapshot of what we're faced with:

- Fifty-four (54) percent of library facilities are not fully accessible to those with physical disabilities.
- Fifty-six (56) percent are more than 50 years old.
- Thirty-eight (38) percent are more than 100 years old with wiring and plumbing in desperate need of upgrades.

These facilities cannot respond in the ways our communities so desperately need them to without capital investment. State Aid for Library Construction is vital to these community institutions to ensure all New Yorkers have access to the basics they deserve.

Public libraries are often described as a “third place” in people’s lives. The third place is a concept related to an idea in community building research which notes the social importance of a third place in people’s lives, beyond their first place, which is their home and their second place which is either work or school depending on your age. The third place, such as a public library, is important for civil society, democracy, civic engagement and establishing feelings of a sense of place. Third places are described as “anchors” of community life, neutral ground, a leveler – meaning it puts no importance on an individual’s economic or social status in a society, which allows for a sense of commonality, of community.

This is what the world needs right now. Civil, civic spaces where people come together to learn together, to know their neighbors – find respect, understanding and empathy for one another. A place where consumerism is not at the center of the interaction. A place where knowledge and problem solving are applied to the best advantage of all. New York is lucky to have libraries in almost every town in the state, a place that provides hope that people still want a sense of community, to be neighbors and to work together for a brighter future.

Libraries in New York are leading the way to that brighter future by providing the platform for good work and the development of solutions that will result in a more sustainable, resilient New York. Library facilities can be a living laboratory – community spaces that are a test bed to generate solutions that enhance the health of people and our planet.

An excellent example of this “living laboratory” idea is the Phoenicia Library in Ulster County. Remember this library’s name because they are about to become famous beyond our System and our state.

In 2011, a fire started in the library’s electrical wires, which dated from initial rural electrification (an example of the catastrophic risk of not investing in infrastructure). Their entire library was destroyed. **Fully 1/3 of their rebuild and expansion was funded through**

the State Aid for Library Construction program. If not for this state aid program they would still be throwing dances and having bake-offs to fundraise to rebuild their building. Instead, residents were able to return to an enhanced building that was finally compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). All barriers to entry (steps, stairway, narrow stacks) were resolved with a 100% ADA compliant building with elevator (first in their town!), entrance ramp, bathroom and open floor plan.

In the course of this story the library board learned that to the aid program not only prioritizes accessibility but energy efficiency, as does the MHLS board when ranking applications. This inspired the board to go further than they might otherwise have, seeking a way to ensure energy efficiency they used the United States Passive House standards to design a building that resulted in an eighty-five (85) percent reduction per square foot of energy use. This library will be **the very first** Passive House designed library in the United States.

After one year in this building, the financial benefits to taxpayers were evident. Previously energy costs for their 1,800 sq. ft. building ran \$8,000 annually. Their entire energy bill over the first year in the building, which included the brutal 2014-2015 winter, was \$1,200 for their retrofitted 3,200 sq. ft. space. This investment in sustainable facility design means lower operating costs for the future, what taxpayer wouldn't be pleased to hear that?

This building is smart inside and out. **While the energy efficiency measures may be invisible to the naked eye what is not is the attention to detail in the interior layout which is devoted to people rather than collections.** The open floor plan with flexible use has meant huge increases in attendance and the circulation. They now have the space to hold programs and events, over 30 per month instead of 30 per year.

- In their first year in the building, program attendance increased by 180%, circulation increased 51%.
- This participation numbers have been maintained in subsequent years at new norm, and circulation continues to grow annually, most recently by 8%.

Another excellent example of the impact the State Aid for Library Construction can have is in the City of Hudson. Twenty-two percent of this community's residents live below the poverty line. Their need for access to quality library service was not being met. The board's move, up the street, to the former Armory building, has resulted in a library space that is finally meeting

the community's needs and the numbers tell the story, in the first year in the new space the library experienced:

- 87% increase in visits to the library
- 31% increase in usage of the library's public access computers
- Almost 400% increase in usage of the library's public wireless network
- 72% increase in attendance at library programs
- 24% increase in the number of items borrowed from the library's collection

These are the kind of numbers that move the dial on improving the quality of life for residents of New York. Through increased access to library services more children will see improvement in school performance. More adults will be able to reskill for today's economy. More neighbors will connect with each other, increasing the resilience of their community.

We provide the platform – the platform for people to come together and learn from one another, to work together to find the solutions of tomorrow. **Libraries contribute to building sustainable, resilient communities by serving as the catalysts and conveners of community.** Libraries serve as examples in our communities of what we can achieve when we work together.

Now is the time to invest in libraries, let the voices of the people themselves be heard. *Please increase State Aid for Public Library Construction.* It is a smart investment for a sustainable, resilient and regenerative future. Please support the people of New York and build a brighter future for us all through the libraries of New York.