

Testimony by Albany Public Library Executive Director Scott C. Jarzombek, MLS – Dec. 13, 2016
NYS Assembly Committee on Libraries and Education Technology

I would like to thank Assemblymember Abinanti, and the Committee on Libraries and Education Technology, for the opportunity to speak to you today.

Every day in the capital of this great state, the Albany Public Library sees 2,000 visitors. That's well over 850,000 people every year passing through our doors. To put it in context, this year Albany Public Library had 700,000 more attendees than the Tri-City ValleyCats had for all of their games this season.

And every day at the library, we loan out close to 2,500 items, provide the portal to over 2,000 internet connections, and deliver educational opportunities through award-winning programming. For example, today at Albany's libraries:

- Teens in the South End will be learning the art of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu,
- New Americans will be practicing their conversational skills at our Delaware Branch,
- Someone will be applying for a job using our Washington Ave. Branch Career Center,
- A certified teacher will be helping adults study for their HSE at our Arbor Hill/West Hill Branch,
- And a librarian will be spending his evening reading to neighborhood children for our "Good Night" story time at the Bach Branch.

That is just one day in the life of Albany Public Library. Multiply this by 7 days a week and you can begin to imagine the positive impact we have on the people of our community.

But we cannot provide these opportunities to our patrons without our 7 buildings.

DLD construction grant funding gives libraries the ability to complete infrastructure repairs and upgrades that are, frankly, not attractive giving opportunities to private donors. No one wants us to put a donor plaque on a boiler or new roof, but such infrastructure projects are absolutely vital to the safe operation of public facilities.

In 2011 and 2013, the Albany Public Library received Library Construct Grant funding to do electrical and HVAC upgrades at our central library location. The year following the improvements, we saw \$78,000 in savings in our utility costs, and in 2016 we achieved well over \$100,000 in savings. While we benefitted from a mild winter, a significant portion of those savings can be directly attributed to the building infrastructure upgrades.

Those construction grants provide libraries with lifelines in unforeseen situations, too. Earlier this year we were dropped by our insurance carrier, which cited inadequate breaker panels at our 50-plus-year-old central library building. At the time, we estimated the cost for replacing those panels to be close to \$100,000. The library didn't anticipate needing to undertake such a project and simply could not afford to cover it in the annual budget. However, we were awarded a 2016 construction grant to do the work. We will now have a safer library, and one that is also fulfilling all insurance requirements.

One essential service all libraries have been providing for more than a decade is that of the digital safety net.

Our ability to use state contracts has helped us stretch our funds so that the net can be cast even wider. According to a Siena College poll done in 2015, for nearly 33% of African-American and Latino respondents, and 25% of households making less than \$50,000 annually, the public library is their primary source of internet access.

In one day, Albany Public Library provides more than 1,000 WiFi sessions and just as many computer sessions. These services are often used by members of the community who cannot afford internet connections, or computers, at home. In a world that requires an email address and website access to simply submit a job application, these are critical services to a large segment of our population.

Our MiFi program allows individuals in the community to “borrow” internet connectivity at home. Purchased on state contract, the cost of these devices is minimal. But there is tremendous impact and empowerment when people can bring the power of the internet into their own homes. This same program is helping us develop a plan to create WiFi locations throughout the city—a digital backbone that we hope will be used to help Albany become a “Smart City.”

Albany Public Library is also lucky to have the support of our local elected officials.

Through the efforts of Assemblymember Fahy, we were able to secure funds to offer STEM and robotics programming for teens. Our Beat Bots program, where young adults learned coding languages and electronics skills to build robots, shows that libraries are not only able to provide essential STEM programming, but also engage youngsters who may not participate in such programs in a traditional school environment. The funding from Assemblymember Fahy was used to buy equipment so that the program can be offered multiple times, or in different iterations, using the same materials. Libraries know how to make a quarter stretch to a dollar.

And while we have gotten good at stretching our budget, we still face substantial finance issues related to the tax cap and limitations to central library funding.

Our community has come to expect us to provide up-to-date technology and a variety of quality programs in safe and comfortable spaces. And the key to keeping these buildings, networks, and programs running is well educated and trained personnel. A significant percentage of our budget is spent on staff, and a growing portion of that is spent on healthcare. The cost of insurance premiums far outpaces the property tax cap. Each year these premiums go up, forcing us to use money from other parts of the budget to fund personnel, who are mission-critical to our role in the community.

It should be recognized that libraries are the model of consolidation and shared services. Library systems throughout the state save millions of dollars and share collections across counties. Thanks to the Upper Hudson Library System, Albany and Rensselaer counties share 1.4 million physical items among 450,000 users. The consortium allows members of the public to use 29 public libraries in the region as if each of them was their own neighborhood library.

The Upper Hudson libraries also have a combined eBook collection of 7,000 items—a well-used collection that was built on state money provided via central library funding. However, due to antiquated restrictions in the funding, this money can only be used to buy adult non-fiction titles. This limitation creates an added burden of finding creative funding sources to purchase the much more popular fiction titles that our eBook readers really want.

Albany Public Library is an example of what public libraries in New York State should be. A welcoming place full of books, materials, workshops, programs, computers, services, advice, and assistance that New Yorkers can count on for education, entertainment, and empowerment. My colleagues and I appreciate the continued support of our elected officials as we provide these essential services to our communities.