

Assembly Standing Committee on Libraries and Education Technology

Public Hearing on Funding Public Libraries | December 13, 2016

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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. I also have the privilege of working, through the New York Library Association, to advocate for all libraries of New York. So I am here today to represent the interests of not just the hundreds of thousands of library cardholders in my region but **over 10 million library cardholders in New York State - that is 53% of New Yorkers** – possibly one of the biggest constituent groups you will come across.

Given the **scale and scope of the impact of libraries** in New York we find it imperative to not only respond to the needs and opportunities that the present day provides us with but to consider the future we create. Part of my job, and yours, is to envision what our world will look like four years from now, a decade from now, even 100 years from now. When we “think big,” about our future and what we all need to focus on it is very clear we need to work together to find smart, practical ways forward. What you may not realize is that **libraries have the power to play a staggeringly important role in the future of New York if we invest in them today.**

“May you live in interesting times,” is allegedly an ancient Chinese curse that certainly brings to mind the state of the world we currently live in. We are contending with **disruption on many fronts: economic, political, environmental and societal.** We have new depths of division and misunderstanding in our country. Neighbors are not talking to each other, family members are divided. Not all feel safe where they live. Not all feel heard where they live.

We desperately need to focus on bringing communities’ together, fostering understanding and valuing education and information literacy as we write the next chapter of our own history. This next chapter will need to bring to life the values we are so proud of in our country – **democracy, equality, freedom of speech and self-determination.**

It is time invest in the infrastructure that **promotes understanding** through education and provides a platform for neighbors to come together to **find local solutions - together.**

Libraries are a uniquely American institution, based on the premise that **a healthy democracy needs an informed electorate**. All New Yorkers deserve access to **accurate information and the information literacy skills to understand that information**. The recent spike in evidence of “fake news” surrounding the presidential election and the alarming number of Americans who were unable to tell the difference between a valid news story and a contrived one points to the desperate need to focus on information literacy for people of all ages and that alone calls for a significant investment in our libraries.

A 20-year study found that **"the presence of books in the home has a greater influence on a child's level of education than does the parents' income, nationality, or level of education."**ⁱ So, in making it possible for all children to have books in the home (and many other ways), libraries are an efficient and effective way to support all the money that we invest in our schools.

However, libraries are so much more than just access to information and books and the literacy skills necessary to comprehend what we read.

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.

There is a grassroots movement to leverage the power of libraries further than we have seen in the past: communities are investing in libraries to become not just the access point to knowledge but the access point for **knowledge creation**. Libraries are transforming, growing beyond the traditional idea of a library as a repository of information to a place where **active application of knowledge** is generating insight and foresight that results in more resilient residents and communities.

Here are just a handful of examples:

●**The Pawling Library in Dutchess County hosts a teen group called Project Do Something.**

Project Do Something got started thanks to two teenage girls who approached the librarian and asked if they could meet at the library to figure out how to do good deeds for their neighbors. The librarian said, “of course” and Project Do Something was born, creating a weekly program where the teens of the community gather to figure out how to do good works in the community. From making blankets for the homeless to online ads for dogs and cats that need to be adopted from the ASPCA to “super hero kits” for kids in the county’s domestic

violence shelters. These kids understood that the library is theirs, a place to learn, a place to create, a place to make a difference.

- **The Plattekill Library is taking a proactive role in addressing the devastating trend of opioid addiction** in their community, convening a meeting for town officials and concerned citizens to educate themselves as to what they can do to respond and to create a town forum to discuss what to do about this together.
- **The Town of Ulster Library has created a Coffee with a Cop program**, inviting local police into the library to be a part of library programming, particularly story time, so families and the local police force get to know each other through positive interactions rather than just during times of stress and strife.
- Dozens of libraries are serving as pick up points for Field Goods a local business **connecting local farmers with buyers for local produce.**
- Libraries around the state are hosting **Citizen Preparedness Corp sessions** helping prepare our citizens for the next natural (or unnatural) disaster.

Chronic underfunding of the library system infrastructure in New York is one of the most nonsensical actions the State has taken in the last decade. A relatively small amount of funds invested in this critical infrastructure can serve as the catalyst for more sustainable local development and collective governance throughout the communities of our great state.

According to the New York State Library the library system infrastructure provides a high return on investment: for every \$1 of state aid invested in libraries local communities see \$7 worth of services. This ability to leverage tax dollars to the maximum benefit is the very essence of our hopes for how tax dollars will be spent.

This investment of state aid in libraries is realizing **real savings for real people**. The families of New York that avail themselves of library services save themselves literally thousands of dollars a year – far higher than the state’s calculation of \$1:\$7. Through the Mid-Hudson Library System’s *Real People. Real Dollars.* campaign this year we invited families to calculate their savings by using the library – we routinely saw figures of \$2,000 to \$4,000 saved per family – exponentially higher amounts than are invested on a per capita basis either locally or through the state. Investing in libraries is like putting cash back in the pockets of your constituents.

Libraries also leverage the State Aid for Public Library Construction to maximum impact. The Phoenicia Library in Ulster County benefited from the program to build what will be the first Passive House certified library in the country. One year in, Library Director Elizabeth Potter

reported that substantial energy savings have been achieved. Previously energy costs for their 1,800 sq. ft. building ran \$8,000. 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? They could not have completed this project without State Aid.

Other libraries are languishing waiting on these funds, currently unable to meet the needs of their communities. In my System alone, 54% of library facilities are not fully accessible to those with physical disabilities. 56 % are more than 50 years old. 38% 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 Public Library Construction is vital to these community institutions to ensure all New Yorkers have access to the basics they deserve.

New York communities need sustainable, resilient solutions for the long haul. Libraries are one of those solutions and it can be a local solution incubator if we do it right. But doing it right means **investing in libraries and library systems TODAY.**

A quote from Eleanor Roosevelt, one of the most famous New Yorkers, is my compass setting, and I hope, yours, as we move forward into the future:

“We make our own history. The course of history is **directed by the choices we make** and our choices grow out of the **ideas, the beliefs, the values, the dreams of the people.** It is not so much the powerful leaders that determine our destiny as **the much more powerful influence of the combined voices of the people themselves.**” -Eleanor Roosevelt

Each choice we make tells the story of who we are and who we hope to be. Now is the time to invest in libraries, let the voices of the people themselves be heard. **Fully fund Library Aid and 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.

ⁱ <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0276562410000090>