



Public Hearing on Funding Public Libraries in New York State

Assembly Standing Committee on Libraries & Education Technology

Friday, November 6, 2015
Celeste Auditorium
Stephen A. Schwarzman Building
New York Public Library
476 Fifth Avenue
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Good morning Chairperson Abinanti and your esteemed colleagues. My name is Claudia Depkin and I'm the director of the Haverstraw King's Daughters Public Library, in Rockland County. I'm also the chairperson of the Regents Advisory Council on Libraries. I thank you for this opportunity to address you about some of my favorite topics: why I love libraries and why you should too, how you can show that love, and if we have time, I'll share some cooking tips.

LIBRARIES ARE EDUCATION. That's such an important concept that I will say it again. LIBRARIES ARE EDUCATION. You'll hear that a lot today because it's a great soundbite that characterizes the role libraries play in our state. A Sienna Research Poll in January of this year indicated that 94% of people feel public libraries are important to our state's educational infrastructure. How is that possible? I'm glad you asked.

Libraries provide computer coding classes so schoolkids and adults can excel in the computer age. We provide homework help and CPR instruction to figuratively and literally help save lives. We provide classroom materials to teachers whose school and in-classroom libraries are insufficient to meet the common core curriculum. We provide access to ebooks, magazine articles, handheld devices, software, and job search help such as interview skills, counseling and resumé creation. We provide adult literacy and citizenship prep classes. We work with local social services organizations in our communities to help our residents receive the support and services they need to be fully engaged members of those communities. And don't even get me started on the early literacy programs we provide because we'll be here all day. Suffice it to say that story time at the library is something you likely enjoyed as a child and we've been keeping the magic alive for decades. But we also provide story time for special needs adults, a population that has been underserved in years past. These are just some of the reasons I think libraries are kind of a big deal and why I think your love should rest squarely with the libraries of New York State.

As far as showing your love, I'm going to ask you to do two specific things and another general thing.

The Haverstraw King's Daughters Public Library serves a population of approximately 30,000 and we enjoy stable funding through our Special Legislative District status and our annual budget votes. We know how lucky we are to have a supportive community at our backs, but there's more to our success than positive voter turnout. Behind every library is a library system. Libraries and patrons reap the benefits of the consolidated and cooperative services that library systems provide. Our jobs are possible because our library systems provide integrated library software that allows us to manage our collections and patron transactions and give patrons freedom to explore our materials from home via the online catalog. Our library systems transport millions of items around the state so that we can put items in our patrons' hands that we don't have on the shelves. Our library systems provide the infrastructure to share materials, and comply with NYS law in the form of the newly-established Government Efficiency Plan. Our library systems share their expertise in the field through continuing education opportunities, on-site consultations and advocacy efforts.

The Ramapo Catskill Library System, which serves my public library, does not have the ability to go for an annual budget vote like we do. Its funding is provided by the state. *Many thanks to you for providing an increase for this year that matched the increase to education. Don't stop there.* For 2016, my library system is facing a deficit of 2.9% of their annual budget. 28% of that deficit will be covered by fund balance, which is a slippery slope that quickly leads to big trouble for the system if state funding is delayed or the roof gets blown off the building in a hurricane. The other 72% will be paid by member libraries, many of which have their own deficits, tax caps and dwindling reserves to deal with. My first specific request to you: Please fund library systems fully, at \$102.6 million for next year. And remember, LIBRARIES ARE EDUCATION. Keep our funding in line with education.

Last year at the main branch of the Haverstraw King's Daughters Public Library in Garnerville we installed solar panels. We are generating 12% of our power, which will result in a savings each year in the five digits. This project was possible only because of the funds provided by the Public Library

Construction Grant Program. We didn't install panels on our 112-year old building in the Village of Haverstraw because the roof couldn't withstand the weight of the panels. A new roof plus solar panels is a project for another construction grant year. For every solar panel or rehabilitation success story that was funded by the Construction Grant program, there are many more public libraries housed in buildings that are too small, too cold in winter and too hot in summer, are energy hogs, not ADA-compliant, have too little power, no staff areas, insufficient parking and the list goes on. Funding public library construction is more than a nice-to-have. It's integral to the health and longevity of our institutions and very literally to the communities we all serve. My second specific request to you: Please increase the Public Library Construction Grant Program to \$25 million, so that more libraries can take advantage of these funds to provide physical library spaces that work and nurture our communities.

Other factors affecting libraries and library budgets are the real property tax cap, minimum wage rates and civil service. The real property tax cap for 2016 is getting ever closer to 0%. With the minimum wage increase plus increases in fixed costs such as retirement plans and health coverage, library patrons across the state may begin to see budgetary cuts in areas no one likes to see: materials budgets, staffing and service hours. So my general request to you: Please work with the New York Library Association and your colleagues in the Assembly and Senate to help us resolve these issues that hold us back from offering the best service possible to our communities.

Finally, I am honored to be a part of a new area of discovery for libraries. Last year the New York Library Association passed a Resolution on the Sustainability of Libraries. That resolution was modified and adopted by the American Library Association this year. The upshot is that we as library professionals across the spectrum of library types, recognize that we play a crucial role in our communities and that we are perfectly positioned and indeed have an obligation to make decisions that positively affect our libraries and communities. We need to ensure that our communities can recover from physical and economic hardship, face new challenges with unity and energy, and grow. The NYLA Sustainability Initiative is the first of its kind in the country, but I know it will not be the last. New York's libraries are trailblazing here and we'll share more information as it develops.

So now you know why I love libraries, why you should love libraries, and what you can do about it. I think I have a couple of seconds left to add those cooking tips you've probably been wondering about. Number 1: As soon as you come at home at night, put water on to boil because it takes longer than you think and you never know if you might need to serve emergency pasta or to help deliver a baby. Number 2: Always use a knife that is longer than the thing you're cutting. It's much more efficient and may make you feel like Gallagher doing his machete/watermelon schtick, and really, who doesn't want to feel like Gallagher doing his machete/watermelon schtick. And finally, if you want a real recipe for success, go to your library and look in the non-fiction section under 641.5. You find lots of great cookbooks there.

Thank you very much for your time and attention. I'll be happy to answer any questions you may have.



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Testimony of the New York Library Association Hearing of the New York State Assembly Standing Committee on Libraries and Education Technology November 6, 2015

Good morning. Thank you for providing me the opportunity to testify today on behalf of our state's local libraries, library systems, and the more than 10 million New Yorkers who hold library cards.

I would like to begin by thanking the Chair of the Committee for calling this hearing, and for his unwavering commitment to our most valuable community assets, our local libraries. The library community is grateful for your leadership of this Committee, and the great work of the Committee under your guidance.

We are also grateful that, with thanks to this Committee and our partners in the legislature, this year's enacted state budget began to address the chronic, inequitable underfunding of the State Library Aid Program. After nearly a decade of piecemeal and patchwork funding proposals, state policymakers finally acknowledged what their constituents have long known: that our state's local libraries are at the core of our state's educational infrastructure, and state library must at least increase each year proportionately with increase in education aid.

Despite having an extra \$5.5B in revenue this year, and proposing up to a 4.8% increase in state education funding, Governor Cuomo proposed flat funding for our community libraries. This comes a year after the Governor proposed a 4.7% cut in library aid, while proposing a 3.8% increase in education funding. Last year's enacted state budget included a 5.7% increase in education funding, but a mere 1.2% increase in local library aid. New York State Education Law requires library aid for FY 2015-2016 to be \$102.6M. This figure is based on the most recent census data. This year's enacted state budget pegs library aid at \$91.6M, or below year 2000 levels.

Most confounding is that these funding choices are occurring when library usage is surging. A January 2015 Siena Research Poll found that over the last three years, library usage is up 10% statewide, 15% among women, nearly 15% among African-American respondents, 15% among Latino respondents, and among all income demographics, with usage up 20% for those households making less than \$50,000 annually. This poll also found that 70% of respondents have used their local library in the last six months.

Libraries are Education

Our state's libraries are chartered by the same Board of Regents that oversees schools, colleges, BOCES and other educational institutions, and library aid is administered through the NYS Department of Education. Libraries are the original pre-K, and are the lone public institutions dedicated to lifelong education. Libraries are the leading digital literacy educators in New York State. When schools close at the end of each day, each week and each school year, libraries remain open to New York's children and families.

These points aren't conjecture or platitudes, they're rooted in fact. According to the above-referenced Siena poll, 94% of respondents said public libraries are important to our state's educational infrastructure, while more than 80% of women, African-Americans, Latinos, and households making less than \$50,000 say public libraries are "very important" to our educational system. A clear majority of respondents want increased library funding, with nearly half saying library funding should increase proportionately with education funding. It is time to stop arbitrarily considering library aid as an expenditure outside of our state's educational infrastructure, and to bring