

Assembly Standing Committee on Libraries and Education Technology

Public Hearing on Funding Public Libraries | November 6, 2015

Rebekkah Smith Aldrich, Coordinator for Library Sustainability, Mid-Hudson Library System, Poughkeepsie, NY
rsmith@midhudson.org | 845.471.6060 x239

The Mid-Hudson Library System is a **cooperative library system** serving 66 public libraries in five counties: Columbia, Dutchess, Greene, Putnam and Ulster. Our libraries serve **over 600,000 New Yorkers** and do so with great passion and effectiveness. We have some of the most innovative and engaged small libraries the country right here in the mid-Hudson Valley.

My job is to **help my libraries connect with their communities** so that they understand community needs, design libraries services that meet those needs and secure the resources to deliver those services. I bear witness to efforts that change lives every day. Kids engaged and excited in discovering new worlds through reading; adults excited to find work with help of the library; newly minted business owners who attribute their success to their local library; residents that band together to find solutions to community wide problems.

In my 17 years working with public libraries what I have learned is this: **libraries make the world a better place.**

Libraries represent the best of what America has to offer. They embody the spirit of **“life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”** and have for generations. Whether or not they can continue to do so is unclear.

What we do know, decisively, is that **New Yorkers believe in libraries.** They believe that libraries are essential. That libraries transform. That libraries are harbingers of hope. New Yorkers empower libraries to empower themselves and their families. I know this to be true because when given the opportunity, **New Yorkers vote YES for libraries.**

Your constituents put their hard-earned dollars where their values lie. On Tuesday, Election Day, in the Hudson Valley, 100% of library budget votes passed with healthy win margins. This year in our System alone, thirty-one communities, **100% of those given the opportunity**, voted yes on their library. Statewide the passage rate for local library budget votes is routinely over 90%. This was also the case during the recession.

However, despite the overwhelming evidence that New Yorkers love their libraries and support them by taxing themselves for library services **we are working with a noose around**

our necks, a noose that is getting tighter each year.

Local libraries are affordable to local tax payers because of the public library system infrastructure that is in place to support them. The efficiencies achieved through state funding to systems is what enables the modern public library to thrive. The denigration of state aid to public library systems is compromising the health of every library in the state. The noose has been tightening for years thanks to this stagnant trend in State Aid.

The increase to state aid for the 2015-2016 budget was a **welcome sign** that the legislature and Governor recognize that libraries are **part of the solution** to keep New Yorkers and New York's economy healthy through **education and innovation**. But with State Aid more than a decade behind pace combined with the Property Tax Cap era compromising local library growth and accelerating the shift of costs from local libraries to systems *the time to act is now*.

The Governor recently chose to veto legislation that would stabilize local funding for two libraries, the Starr Library in Rhinebeck and the Seymour Library in Brockport. An **extremely troubling** move. This veto, of legislation that would increase local control of the future of a public library, effectively **disenfranchised the voters** of the Town of Rhinebeck. This legislation would have stabilized an existing library – increasing accountability and transparency and ensuring that local voters could steer the fate of their local library and themselves. The Governor has vetoed three such pieces of legislation, a disturbing trend that hampers the sustainability of public library funding in New York by effectively eliminating the primary funding model recommended by the New York State Board of Regents. And the noose tightens just a little bit more.

In the tax cap era, without both **proper local funding mechanisms**, like the special district option, and **appropriate levels of state aid to support the public library system infrastructure** we have a **recipe for disaster on our hands**. To borrow a phrase from the Office of the State Comptroller many libraries will be in a state of **"fiscal distress"** if the legislature is not proactive in upwardly adjusting library aid.

The legislature can also do something about another strand in the rope that makes up the noose around the necks of New York's libraries: invest in sustainable library facilities. **Increase the State Aid for Public Library program**. \$14 million is currently allocated, statewide, for this program. In my system we receive over half a million dollars annually to address the \$55 million of reported need amongst just our libraries. Over half of that \$55 million is for

association libraries who do not have the ability to bond for capital financing. In almost every case, the State Aid for Public Library Construction program is an association library's "hail mary pass" to provide a library facility that meets the needs of their community.

At our system we go through an agonizing process each year to divide up the available funds amongst our libraries, the need is so great, yet no single library gets what is needed. This impedes progress and allows inexcusable conditions such as inadequate space, locations that are not physically accessible to all in the community, historic buildings without the wiring capacity to support the technology needed in a 21st century library to persist much longer than should be acceptable.

I cannot underscore enough how critical State Aid for Public Library Construction is to the libraries of my System. One of our most recent success stories is the Phoenicia Library in Ulster County.

After a devastating fire that gutted their perfectly located Main Street location the Phoenicia Library literally rose from the ashes with a Hallmark-movie-of-the-week quality. **They could not have done so without the funds available through the State Aid for Public Library Construction program.** The library fought through fire, a flood, a lawsuit and against all odds rebuilt thanks to an amazing community that believed a library was essential to being a community and thanks to the State Aid for Public Library Construction program. Those funds helped revitalize a Main Street institution, an impact that will be felt for generations to come.

Phoenicia built a library that is all about the people it serves. Meeting spaces are centric to its design and they put particular emphasis on sustainable design – understanding that if you truly care about your community you care about their health, the longevity of natural resource and the need to stabilize and manage long-term operating costs. As a result they have created a highly energy efficient facility that is slated to be the very first Passive House-certified public library in the United States. **They could not have done this without two grants through the State Aid for Public Library Construction Program.** As an association library with no ability to bond for construction, this funding was absolutely essential to their comeback story.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, upon the opening of his presidential library in 1941 declared the dedication of any library as an act of faith – a sign of hope for the future.

Isn't that what we want here in New York, isn't that what New Yorkers deserve? Hope? Hope that government, working together with its citizens, can make life better for all? I ask you, what else is there? When you strip away the politics, the problems, the hurdles and the

nonsense and are reminded of why you ran for office, why I work with libraries, why any of us get up in the morning and keep going – it is because we care. We care for each other and we want the world to be a better place.

Libraries are part of the solution to create communities that have the capacity to endure, to bounce back from disruption. They serve as a catalyst to bring new and energetic life to the communities they serve – exactly what I would imagine you want for the people you represent.

Investing in libraries is a manifestation of hope. It is a high sign from the government to the people it serves that you believe in them. **You believe they have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.**

What we are proposing is an investment opportunity.

Let's follow the lead of our fellow New Yorkers and invest in libraries. Let's make the most of this moment in time. Let us focus on sustainable funding and sustainable library facilities as our legacy to future generations. Let's invest not just in libraries but in New Yorkers. Let's empower them as they have us by investing in the organizations that mean so much to them.

An investment in libraries is an investment in New Yorkers.