



The Voice of the Library Community

New York Library Association

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The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
New York State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo:

As the Directors of New York State's twenty-three public library systems, representing all seven hundred fifty-six local public libraries in communities throughout our state, we urge you to address an impending crisis for local economies: our state's rapidly aging physical library infrastructure. Through collaborative planning, collective purchasing, and sharing of resources, our state's public library systems allow local libraries to provide critical, low-cost educational services to every New Yorker. However, reductions in the state Library Aid Program have constrained our ability to maintain current service levels at a time when local libraries are forced to expend already diminished operating revenues to address rising costs associated with deteriorating and outmoded buildings. Without a renewed commitment to the state Library Construction Aid Program ("the Program"), our communities will be forced to choose between two disastrous economic outcomes: raise local taxes, or further reduce the critical library services upon which residents rely. Increased funding for the Program would provide a direct economic, educational, and equitable benefit to each community in our state which will endure for generations to come.

As you know, funding for the state Library Construction Aid Program has remained stagnant at \$14M annually since 2006, despite a report from the State Education Department's Division of Library Development (DLD) that \$2.2B is desperately needed for construction projects in libraries statewide. Under the Program, the state makes matched grants available to benefit every community that has a public library. This program particularly aids upstate and suburban communities with basic, but expensive, infrastructure upkeep: dilapidated roofs, failing foundations, crumbling parking lots, and decades-old heating and cooling systems. The program is also extremely efficient in its administration, with a 5:1 return on every state dollar invested according to the State Education Department. A strong funding commitment has the potential to transform the Program into an economic development driver for every community in the state; instead, we have a Program that barely addresses routine maintenance needs, let alone long-deferred projects.

For many libraries, the lack of capital funding to address aging, inefficient buildings means operating revenues are increasingly consumed for energy costs at the expense of patron services. Nearly half of the local libraries in New York State are now over 60 years old, with an additional one-third over 30 years old. Aging infrastructure is further exacerbated by the historic surge in library usage. A 2015 Siena Institute Research Poll found that library use is up 10% across all demographics statewide. Usage is up 15% among women respondents aged 18-34; up 15% in communities of color; and up 20% for households making less than \$50,000 annually. This same poll found that nearly 70% of New Yorkers have used their local public library in the past six months.

Increased funding for the state Library Construction Aid Program would allow older libraries to undertake desperately needed energy efficiency measures – replacing old and malfunctioning HVAC systems, decaying insulation, and decades-old lighting, windows and doors – and explore installation of renewable clean energy options. Current funding for the state Library Construction Aid Program provides only \$2.2M towards energy efficiency initiatives such as installation of solar panels and geothermal wells, and only seven public libraries in New York State have achieved LEED certification. An investment in the Program would immediately help hundreds of libraries reduce energy consumption and greatly aid the state achieve its energy goals.

More troubling is that this aging infrastructure is a demonstrable impediment to addressing economic inequality in vulnerable communities throughout our state. The surge in library usage is largely attributable to exponential use of library meeting space to connect community-based nonprofit organizations with patrons in need of services, to provide instructional space for seminars on job-seeking and homeowner resources, and to bridge the digital divide by providing access to common technologies many take for granted. Startlingly, **for nearly 33% of African-American and Latino respondents, and 25% of households making less than \$50,000 annually, the local public library is their primary source of internet access.** Further, of the respondents who have used their local public library for job seeking or career building programs in the last six months, 53% were African-American, and 40% were households making less than \$50,000 annually. Increased funding for the state Library Construction Aid Program would facilitate renovations to accommodate these new and evolving uses, and to better serve all patrons - nearly 25% of libraries do not have all public areas accessible to wheelchairs.

This is the right time for the state to invest in public libraries. New York City's enacted 2016 budget includes not only an additional \$43M in library operating aid, but a long-overdue 10-year, \$300M capital commitment to infrastructure improvements. The state recently made a 5-year, \$900M investment in our park system. In the upcoming year, the state is contemplating an \$8.3B investment to address the public transportation infrastructure of New York City, and possibly billions more for the rest of the state. An investment in our state's aging education infrastructure is long overdue. A comparatively modest investment in the state Library Construction Aid Program to match New York City's commitment of \$30M annually, the matching provisions of the Program would leverage the funding into \$1.42B over ten years. This historic commitment would directly benefit the economies of nearly every community statewide, aid your administration's energy goals, combat rising income inequality, improve our state's educational infrastructure, and begin to provide New York with a statewide system of modern libraries our residents have not enjoyed since the turn of the 20th century.

We, the Directors of all twenty-three of our state's public library systems, on behalf of our state's seven hundred fifty-six local public libraries and the millions of New Yorkers who rely on the services they provide, encourage you to make a renewed commitment to the state Library Construction Aid Program in your upcoming Executive Budget. With your commitment, we can transform an impending economic crisis into an economic opportunity to benefit hundreds of communities throughout our state.