

Assembly Standing Committee on Libraries and Education Technology

Public Hearing on Funding Public Libraries | December 15, 2022

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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 to serve over 600,000 residents of Columbia, Dutchess, Greene, Putnam and Ulster counties. In addition to my day job, through my volunteer work in our professional associations, I have spent a good part of the last decade working internationally alongside my peers to ensure our libraries are relevant, responsive and a source of hope in the communities that we serve, particularly in the face of climate change.

I am the co-founder of the Sustainable Libraries Initiative, a national program to cultivate leadership in libraries to address issues of environmental stewardship, social equity and economic feasibility in our communities as well as to ensure libraries are contributing to community resilience. I am a founding board member of the American Library Association's Sustainability Round Table, founding chair of the American Library Association's Council Committee on Sustainability and currently serve on the advisory board of the Center for the Future of Libraries. I have authored three books on the topics of sustainable libraries and community resilience and take great joy in the recent adoption of sustainability as a core value of our profession by the American Library Association.

Today I am here to encourage the committee continue their strong work to support and amplify the potential of libraries to help lead the way in supporting New Yorkers as they confront the realities of climate change and create more sustainable, resilient and regenerative communities.

I have been asked to speak, in particular, to the need for investment in the State Aid for Library Construction Program. I have worked as an administrator of this program in my region for just over twenty years. I have personally seen these funds accelerate a community's ability to develop library facilities and infrastructure to meet their needs and, increasingly, I am seeing how these funds are being leveraged to protect and prepare public library infrastructure from the rise in frequent, severe weather affecting our state so that they will be prepared to support our communities as residents contend with climate change-induced weather disasters and related issues.

Before I speak to the grand challenge of adaption in the face of the effects of climate change, I would be remiss if I did not address the existing infrastructure problems modern library leaders have inherited in my system:

- Forty-five (45) percent of library facilities are not fully accessible to those with physical disabilities. This number was 54% three years ago. The change was much due to the investment in our member library facilities through the State Aid for Library Construction Program.
- Fifty-six (56) percent are more than 50 years old.
- Thirty-eight (38) percent are more than 100 years old with wiring and plumbing in desperate need of upgrades.

In addition to basic renovations and expansions to bring library facilities up to a bare minimum definition of acceptability and respectability, I see four particular growing, areas of focus which speak to the need for continued and increasing funds to flow from the state to the libraries of New York:

- 1) **Broadband connectivity.** Eighty-three percent (83%) of the libraries in my system currently report they do not offer the broadband connectivity speed recommended by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the American Library Association (ALA). We have no libraries offering a gigabit connection. Access and affordability play a

part in answering the question of why this is. The State Aid for Library Construction Program can affect changes in this statistic. A relatively new change to the New York State's Education Commissioner's regulations allow for broadband connectivity projects to be eligible through the program and the state library has been investing resources to help educate library leaders on this subject so these funds can be leveraged for this purpose. This lack of connectivity speed impacts not only patron access at libraries, which I know many of my peers here today will speak to eloquently, but it also compromises library operational infrastructure. I say that as libraires today run on software that is often hosted in the cloud, the very simple operations of searching the library catalog, checking out a book, requesting a book to be sent to a new location – rely on strong broadband connectivity. Add on the demand from patrons to access a strong broadband connection from the library facility and you can see how quickly bandwidth is spoken form. There is significant work to be done on this topic and these funds are critical to this effort.

- 2) **The demographic trends in our state speak strongly to the fact that more New Yorkers are choosing to age in place.** As the largest age cohort in American history, the baby boomers have had a significant impact on American culture and infrastructure. As this generation ages, technology and other demographic changes and expectations continue to change. Housing, workforce training, employment, healthcare, and library services must adapt to address the aging of this generation. According to the Cornell Program on Applied Demographics, the total New York state population is projected to remain flat through 2040. While overall population stagnates, New York state is projected to see an increase in aging residents. New York state as a whole will grow only 1.3% by 2040, but the population of those over the age of 80 will grow by 42.2%. The growth of older cohorts is expected to have the most impact upstate, outside of Metro-NYC, and the Hudson Valley is part of this growth trend. In the Hudson Valley, total population is

anticipated to grow by 5.9% by 2040, yet the over-80 population is anticipated to grow by 54.6%. Libraries need to be fully accessible to folks of all ages and abilities. This means entryways to library facilities that are accessible to all, not just those who are not living with a disability. This means elevators that consistently work and are safe; bathrooms that are accessible to all; and more assistive technology to aid those with vision and hearing issues. Libraries have long been the number one point of access to internet and technology for folks who do not have it at home but even as we see a higher adoption of device use and digital literacy, as needs change physically, access issues arise that libraries will play a part in solving. The intersection of digital literacy with aging populations make libraries a centerpiece solution to ensure all New Yorkers have the access they need to be active participants in civic life; to benefit from services underwritten by the state and federal government; and to have a dialogue with younger generations that may be using technology in new and creative ways to make art, share information, and communicate with loved ones – which leads me to the third area of focus impacting the future of library facilities.

- 3) **Space for people.** In a recent survey of the member library directors of the Mid-Hudson Library System we asked if library user motivations for library use have changed since the beginning of the pandemic. The answer was a resounding “yes.” In just two years, library administrators are reporting a universal shift the answer to why people are coming to libraries. While we still see traditional transactional usage – borrowing items, downloading material, asking reference questions – there has been a sharp increase in folks coming to the library to be a part of their community and to interact with others as co-educators and neighbors. To learn with their neighbors at library programs; to interact with technology and experts in library makerspaces; to get out into their community to connect with its history and nature thanks to library programs that celebrate the place we choose to call home; even just to sit and chat with others in a

non-commercialized space where they are not expected to purchase anything or rent their seat - this is where the clear growth has been over the past two years in our region.

Traditionally, libraries were designed around collections of items – books, periodicals to start with, and then technology arrived on the scene that facilities were expanded to include. Space for people though – small meeting rooms, large programming rooms, even quiet reading rooms for folks who need space to concentrate in this very noisy world – is at a premium and is the top area of focus in renovation projects in our system. Library facilities should not just about the books on their shelves, the databases and eresources available through our computers – they are about the people who access services through our facilities which increasingly includes classes and one-on-one assistance with technology from library staff. People need people and they find community at our libraries in spaces often under resourced to meet their needs in this way. As we deal with the considerable impacts of ebooks on our collection development strategies it is clear that interactive space for technology and meeting spaces will be the new focal points in the design of local public libraries.

- 4) **Climate change is the single greatest threat to global health¹, a “code red for humanity”² and is this generation’s grandest challenge.** According to The Lancet, a leading medical journal, climate change will impact the health of every child alive today. Severe weather, powered by climate change, is expected to get increasingly worse over the next three decades, even if we were to do all we could to mitigate climate change³.

Increasingly severe weather, food scarcity caused by droughts and lack of biodiversity,

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/07/1034670549/climate-change-is-the-greatest-threat-to-public-health-top-medical-journals-warn>

² <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/08/1097362>

³ <https://www.nbcnews.com/science/environment/think-2020s-disasters-are-wild-experts-say-worst-yet-come-rcna114>

intense heat, record-setting wildfires, and sunny-day flooding are all acute indicators that climate change is here and is already a deadly and costly aspect of modern life. Our ability to pull together as neighbors, adapt in the face of what is already happening while lessening the severity of the impacts for future generations will require us to think differently, to adopt a new mindset, and to consider decisions – large and small – through the lens of sustainability.

The American Library Association named sustainability as a core value of the profession in recognition of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) finding that the immediate consequences of climate change were far more dire than originally predicted⁴. The IPCC was calling for a transformation of the world economy at a speed and scale that has “no documented historic precedent.” This coincided with the Fourth National Climate Assessment finding that due to lack of action by society, climate change induced damage to the economy, environment and human health had become unavoidable⁵.

This pivotal moment was calling for simultaneous change to both slow the effects of climate change through the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions while also building community resilience to adapt in the face of the impacts climate change is already causing.

We must prioritize decarbonization. Decarbonization means evolving away from energy systems that produce carbon dioxide (CO₂) and other greenhouse gas emissions. We must focus on:

- Energy efficient facilities

⁴ <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>

⁵ <https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/>

- Switching to renewable energy sources
- Electric vehicles

Libraries are perfectly positioned to help with this work and to lead in this work. We must step up in this moment and find ways to lead by example and inspire those we serve with and for to do the same.

The State Aid for Library Construction program can be leveraged not only for decarbonization projects but also to protect library facility infrastructure in the face of increasingly severe weather so New Yorkers can access library services in the aftermath of these events.

Libraries who are early adopters of their role as leaders on the topic of sustainability are using these funds in a variety of ways to mitigate and adapt in the face of climate change, for example:

- Installing whole-building generators, to ensure the facility can be up and running quickly after a severe weather event or in the face of an extended power outage.
- Working towards energy independence, lessening the reliance on fossil fuels, and reducing the greenhouse gas emissions caused by their use, by integrating renewable energy such as geothermal and solar panels.
- Upgrading stormwater systems to manage heavy rainfalls. They are using these funds to protect against 100-year floods that happen on a much quicker timeline than their name would suggest.
- Contributing to the electric vehicle (EV) charging station infrastructure in New York State by installing EV Charging stations in library parking lots.

Legislators and libraries have something in common: we define ourselves by our ethics, our outcomes, and our ability to improve the lives we touch through our work. If we are not working to make the world a better place, what else is there? To achieve the scale of radical change necessary to mitigate the impacts of climate change we truly must adopt the idea that every job is a climate job, we must do what we can from our sphere of influence in our workplace as well as our personal lives. We hope you will do what you can from your sphere of influence to increase the funds devoted to the State Aid for Library Construction program and we will use our sphere of influence to create climate smart facilities that serve as model public buildings folks can learn from in communities throughout New York State.

Thank you for your time and attention. We appreciate your service on the Assembly Standing Committee on Librarians & Education Technology and thank you for your focus on the topic of library infrastructure.