

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY - A HIGHLY VALUED AMERICAN INSTITUTION

For well over 200 years, people of all ages and backgrounds have relied on the public library in these United States of America.

Citizens come to the public library to access information. The information materializes in the traditional form of the print-on-paper of books and journals, on microforms, in various forms of media such as books-on-CD and DVDs, and now via electronically accessible resources.

Public libraries, moreover, have long been a cornerstone of our democratic system. The public library can be -- and for many is -- a place where persons of all walks of life meet to discuss, to learn from one another, and to take advantage of the library as a fundamental resource of ideas and information.

James Madison once warned, "Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who wish to remain free must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."

Funded primarily by the community it serves, governed locally, and used mainly by the people who pay for it via their taxes, the

public library is a central physical and social place for the entire community. Access to the public library creates a level playing field for all people who come to it.

HISTORY AND LEGACY OF THE AMERICAN PUBLIC LIBRARY

Public libraries are an American invention. Benjamin Franklin organized a subscription library that pooled books of Philadelphia residents in 1731. Franklin's "invention" was the forerunner of the public library we know today. The first free public library supported by taxation was established in Peterborough, New Hampshire, in 1833.

An Allegheny, Pennsylvania resident, James Anderson, made his 400 hundred volume library available to boys who worked in the town, one of whom was a telegraph messenger named Andrew Carnegie. After becoming a steel baron, a grateful Carnegie provided funding of some 50 million dollars for public library construction throughout the country and abroad. In all, Carnegie aided in the building of more than 2,500 public and academic libraries.

Today, libraries are more important than ever because reading is still the most basic survival skill in our information-driven society. For children from homes where the only book is might be the telephone book and the only magazine the TV listings, the public library is their one great hope. Renowned author James Michener said, prior to his death, "Libraries represent an individual's right to

acquire knowledge. Without libraries, I would be a pauper, intellectually and spiritually."¹

AT THE HEART OF THE COMMUNITY

The public library is at the heart of a community's civic identity and sense of civic purpose.

Both by internal commitment and in response to necessity, the public library has been one of this country's most adaptable and versatile public institutions. Whether coping with the transformation and explosion of new information technologies, or with the major changes in character of our cities, towns, suburban communities and rural and farming areas, the public library has been on the "cutting edge" of America's growth and development. Libraries have blended older and newer information technologies while keeping pace with their communities' changing demographics and needs. In an era when many complain that our public institutions are not keeping up with the ever-accelerating pace of change, many public libraries are the exception.

Public libraries have not, of course, escaped the pressures of life today. Nonetheless, given the demands of life today, and as we face a new decade in a still-new millennium, the public library, more numerous on the American landscape than McDonald's restaurants, remains a crucial resource for the renewal of civic purpose.

¹ Michener, James. "How Stupid Can We Get?" *Reader's Digest*, April 1994.

As the Civil War began, President Abraham Lincoln told Congress "The people will save their government if the government will but give them the means to do it." Today, people can and will "save themselves" if local governments and policy-makers -- and their constituents -- recognize and support the full potential of the public library.

Public libraries, as the embodiment of the democratic ideal, are uniquely democratic institutions. Their value as a critical component of a democratic society remains thoroughly engrained in our national psyche.

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

We are now in the midst of a third great wave of expansion of public libraries in this country.

- The first period of rapid growth was the result of Andrew Carnegie's vision and largesse; his belief in the value of the public library in the development of a nation was steadfast, his financial support unparalleled
- The second period occurred during the third quarter of the 20th Century -- the result of the rapidly expanding and moving population of the United States; the trifecta of suburban growth, college and university expansion, and LSA and LSCA governmental support contributed to this period
- The third wave of tremendous growth in our public libraries is now underway, a period marked by the expansion of the capabilities of libraries to access and deliver information via electronic-driven technology; never before has the opportunity been so great for libraries, while, at the same

time, there currently exists a library building boom not experienced since the mid-1960s.

The stakes embodied in the third wave are high. To wit:

- Increasingly diverse constituencies are demanding increasingly diverse collections
- Interdisciplinary research is becoming the norm
- The expenses associated with technology and more buildings threaten already overtaxed library budgets
- Fee-based services and commercial contracts that may limit access to particular groups could result in a society of information rich and poor.

High stakes imply a high return:

- The opportunities for public libraries to fulfill their mission on a grand scale are real
- The delivery of information to economically-challenged residents in the same quality and time as that received in affluent settings addresses issues of equity like never before
- Electronic access to huge collections by small libraries brings resources heretofore undreamed of to their constituencies
- Libraries sharing resources over great distances break down barriers to learning.

Public library services have traditionally been provided without fees or user charges because of the accepted notion that such services benefit the community more than they benefit the individual user. In other words, public library services are viewed

as a public good, meaning the services are not always but “usually provided by government for consumption by the general public.”² Public goods have two defining aspects:

- Public goods possess a “non-rival consumption” aspect, i.e., the availability of the good to all is not reduced by any one person’s consumption of the good
- Public goods have a “non-excludability” aspect in that there is no way to effectively restrict the benefits of public goods to those who directly pay for them.

LIBRARY USERS ARE ACTIVE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

LONG OVERDUE: A Fresh Look at Public and Leadership Attitudes About Libraries In the 21st Century was published by Public Agenda June 2006.³

² Moffat, D. W. *Economics Dictionary*, 2nd edition, New York, New York, Elsevier, c1983.

³ The study was based on telephone interviews with a national random sample of 1,203 adults 18 years and older. Of those, 458 interviews were done with respondents who are civically engaged in the community in a number of ways, such as voting and volunteerism. Public Agenda also conducted 34 in- depth interviews with national and community leaders in politics, business, education, public health and library architecture to share their perspectives about the future of public libraries in America, as well as focus groups in six diverse communities across the nation. The study was supported by Americans for Libraries Council and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Among the findings was “Five things community leaders should know about libraries and the public.”

1. **Libraries are highly valued** – Libraries received the best grade of the community institutions covered in a national survey. Nearly 50 percent of the public gave the libraries an “A,” higher than public schools, the police, and the local news media. Over 60 percent said libraries are “essential for maintaining a productive community.”
2. **Libraries are important 21st century resources** – Computers and Internet access in libraries are essential. Two of every three persons surveyed stated that having enough computers and online services should be a “high priority for libraries.”
3. **Voters love libraries** – Folks who vote in nearly every local election and volunteer and donate money to charities are library supporters – 75 percent have a library card.
4. **Libraries use tax funds wisely** – Both library users and non-users believe their local libraries use their tax funds wisely.
5. **The public welcomes a greater role for libraries** – Four specific areas were identified as positives for local libraries to integrate themselves more fully into the life of the community they serve:
 - Be a safe and engaging place for teens
 - Be involved as a literacy skills place for a strong

- workforce
- Be a center for community information
- Be a strong access point for technology.

Ohio voters dramatically proved the public’s appreciation for their local public library this past November. On Election Day voters approved 29 of the 37 library levies by cash-starved libraries reeling from 11th-hour budget cuts to state aid for FY2010-12. The impressive display by the public translated into a reprieve for 81 percent of the library systems in the Buckeye State.

Among the most dramatic victories was the passage, with a whooping 72 percent favorable vote, on the initial millage for the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County. The victory was most gratifying in light of the active campaigning of an opposition group calling itself COAST (Coalition Opposed to Additional Spending and Taxes). COAST accused the library of “showing a disregard of out tax dollars” by “overspending for guest speakers, free book giveaways, billboards, and media campaigns” as well as failing “to look for additional revenue streams” such as charging \$1 per audiovisual loan.⁴

THE FUTURE BELONGS TO THOSE WHO PLAN FOR IT!

⁴ Goldberg, Beverly. “Library Levy Landslides Make History in Ohio.” *American Libraries*, December 2009, p. 18.