
April 19, 2019

Joint Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Capital Construction
900 Court St, NE, HR-E
Salem, OR 97301

RE: Library Bonding

Good afternoon, Co-Chairs Girod and Holvey and members of the committee,

I am Director of Libraries Vailey Oehlke. I am grateful for the opportunity to talk about what we're doing to improve library service, especially in East Multnomah County. People might think of a public library as a building with books, but it's so much more. Today, libraries are places where people of all ages learn and create. They are places where young people learn to write code for video games, where people can follow their path to a GED or United States citizenship, and where entrepreneurs access resources to launch new businesses.

Multnomah County Library is both the busiest library system in the nation for a community of its size, but it's also the smallest in terms of total space available to the community. This deficit means missed opportunities for the Oregonians we serve. Kids can use 3D printers, but currently only at one location. Quiet study spaces are popular, but are only available at two libraries. At some libraries, we have to decline 70% of the public's requests to use public meeting rooms because they're already booked. 70%! If you've ever visited Rockwood Library after school lets out, brimming with young people, you've seen how much more we could do with modern and adequate spaces.

Since 2016, we've been studying ways to fix these problems. We conducted a yearlong analysis involving community members, school districts, community-based organizations, other nonprofit, arts, and business leaders. That process also included focus groups with historically underserved communities, a public survey with 1,700 responses and 50 conversations with 2,000 community members. In 2017, the Board of County Commissioners approved the framework that resulted from that process. Among the most startling findings of that analysis was that, east of Interstate 205, we find 40% of the county's population, yet just 23% of total library space. That's a disparity we want to fix.

Since then we've had productive conversations with potential partners like the City of Gresham. A new state-of-the-art library in Rockwood will complement and enhance neighboring services and investments like Rockwood Rising. It will boost economic and workforce development. With expert staff who provide culturally responsive service in six languages and to communities of color, and a commitment to serving those facing the greatest barriers, Multnomah County Library is ready to get to work. With your support, and with the support of Chair Kafoury, Commissioner Stegmann and the other members of the Board of County Commissioners, we can create a vibrant and vital public amenity for generations to come.

Thank you,
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