

2023 Library District (Multnomah) Hearing Questions for FY 2023-24 Approved Budget

(60 min hearing)

- 1) The county levies for library bonds that fund capital projects. These projects will result in significant changes to the Library's current infrastructure. From new buildings to refreshing existing ones, nearly all aspects of the library's physical spaces will be evolving. How will library programming change as a result of the new spaces, and what staff impacts do you expect to see?**

(Annie Lewis)

The library bond projects will reinvent how our community can use library spaces. Libraries will still have the collections and resources people know and love, but the true experience of being in a library will be centered around people. The thoughtful expansion of library spaces will introduce new, more flexible spaces for programming and services that are responsive to community needs.

For decades, the constraints of our physical footprint have impacted where we could offer library programming and services. We now have an opportunity to recenter the library as the place for library services. In addition to supporting popular library programs, we will now be able to offer expanded creative opportunities through the major investment in technology being made in these buildings— including audio studios for music and podcasting, creative learning spaces that can support a variety of programs, makerspaces for STEAM learning, improved audio/video and internet support, and even an auditorium at the East County Library, which will center the library as a space for civic engagement, community entertainment and many other programming opportunities.

Adding more flexible space and cutting edge technologies to library buildings and operations means that we will need to train and reorient current staff, and add new staff to realize the full potential of these new spaces. We'll need staffing that can support new technologies and additional community programming. The FY 24 budget also includes a Community Partnerships Manager position to develop new, location-specific partnerships so that community groups can begin to co-create programming in new library spaces.

- 2) Let's talk about library closures happening while bond projects are underway. Currently six libraries are closed to the public. What work are you doing to mitigate impacts to the community which appears to be caught by surprise about the breadth and duration of these closures? What is in place currently, and what do you have planned for the duration of the projects?**

(Annie Lewis)

After voters approved the library bond in November 2020, the library and Multnomah County leadership agreed on fiscally responsible and aggressive bond spending deadlines to maximize taxpayer investment, and mitigate the dramatic effects of inflation and supply chain disruptions. The construction schedule has disrupted some services, as multiple library building closures happen simultaneously.

To reduce the impact of these closures, the library has proactively been communicating with patrons about the closures and promoting alternative locations and services. Using an equity framework, the library has expanded staff support at open locations and opened temporary services to communities most impacted by the closures.

For instance, down the block from the Central Library in downtown Portland is the library's Community Tech Space. This space offers technology access and help, including free internet and computer use, device charging, printing, faxing and scanning. The Mobile Library, located at a Multnomah County property at 122nd and Glisan is also providing technology support, access to culturally and linguistically relevant materials, and more.

Staff at closed locations have been reassigned to outreach teams in each of the geographic regions where libraries are closed - Northeast, Downtown, and Mid-County. These outreach teams are providing drop-in library and tech-help services at community organizations such as the Chinese Language School and the Rosewood initiative.

The brief closure of several libraries at the same time is a difficult tradeoff, but the new library spaces on their way will allow for a significant advancement in this community's ability to bring together people, information, opportunities and resources.

3) We know you have prioritized community engagement throughout the bond projects. Are you getting the level of response you hoped for from the community? What engagement techniques have been particularly effective? What techniques are not working?

- a) Follow up: Can you share an example of something from recent feedback received that will be incorporated into your plans for bond projects?**

(Annie Lewis)

The creation of the [Library Capital Bond Program's Community Engagement Ethos](#) guides each of the nine major projects. With the spirit of the community being in the room for key design decision points, the design teams use a variety of community engagement channels to amplify the voices of those most often underrepresented by government, education, and other organizations.

Community engagement channels currently include:

- Public community meetings: virtual and in-person
- Tabling and outreach at community events
- Paid community engagement programs

- Focus groups
- 1:1 Interviews
- Asynchronous opportunities
- Public surveys

Engagement for the Chapter One projects (Holgate, Midland, Albina, and North Portland), met *and exceeded* the library's commitment to community engagement. While online meetings were sparsely attended and not a productive technique to deeply engage community members, turnout for public events at libraries, farmers markets, and community celebrations proved an excellent way to grow awareness of the project and ask specific questions for direction and preference. Team members are out in the community at the 21st Annual Autism Walk, Hacienda CDC food pantry, Dishman Community Center and dozens of other community gathering points. The library is providing public voting on a variety of topics for each major project and

Three techniques stand out in our first set of projects:

- First, the paid community engagement programs across all four projects brought grassroots community organizers of all ages close to the design process. From Community Design Advocates holding focus groups within their communities to teens participating in the Youth Opportunity Design Approach, offering paid opportunities to the community provide respect, dignity, and a value of time to folks often left out due to transportation, childcare, and other barriers to participation. Some of the deepest insights and solutions came from these community members, and they are by far the most popular speakers at each of the projects' groundbreaking ceremonies. Compensated community design team members are surveyed annually on their satisfaction with the program.
- Another stand-out impact of community engagement is the lasting impression community members are making in our buildings through art. Community art workshops hosted by both Regional Art & Culture Council (RACC) artists and architects invited the public to share of themselves, their culture and creativity to inspire the artwork that each building will include. These workshops provide a hands-on contribution while also offering the community the experience of being part of a collaborative art installation. Community art is a vital aspect of many library projects and for participants, a tangible touchpoint and imprint of themselves as part of the final buildings.
- One broad engagement technique that brought out thousands of community members' opinions was the public voting offered on Chapter 1 projects. Voting on themes and colorways for interiors and exteriors has turned out to be extraordinary popular and fairly easy to manage. This process gives community members both insight into the design process and a chance to offer their opinion on the look and feel of library buildings. The team will continue to look for additional public voting opportunities on remaining projects.

The East County Library project is deep into community engagement and while the project team is utilizing those established techniques mentioned earlier, they are also experimenting with additional outreach through media ads as well as expansive outreach work with established community organizations in East County through a paid Library Champions program. Engagement planning for the final projects (Northwest, St. John's and Belmont) is underway.

Many themes have emerged across our communities that speak to a common desire: one of connection. People have shared that they want a place to cook food and share cultural recipes, a place to make art and music, a place to gather with others and learn from each other, and a place to be with nature. In all of these, our community is asking for space to connect with others and with themselves and this is resulting directly in amenities offered in our buildings, including outdoor courtyards, reading gardens, gathering circles, and flexible civic plazas.

4) Some library patrons may have misgivings about the planned changes to libraries, such as the reduction in the number of printed materials, both new and in special collections. What is your response to those who may question the current direction the Library is taking?

(Annie Lewis)

Even before the pandemic completely altered how we all lived and accessed resources, the library was changing to meet modern needs. We've continued to invest in both print and digital collections and tailor our services to meet accelerated needs for resources in multiple languages, new technologies and diverse programming. Circulation of digital materials has been increasing at an incredible rate.

Digital checkouts now represent 61 percent of Multnomah County Library's overall circulation! Over the past 10 years, digital checkouts have increased more than 900%.

The good news is that with these spaces, **we're not reducing the overall size of our printed materials collection that is available for circulation.** This is a common misunderstanding. Libraries will continue to provide books and other physical materials, and the number is not decreasing.

The creation of a new centralized operations center, means we can store and circulate thousands of materials directly from that one building, rather than manually packing and processing items by hand from branch to branch to eventually be picked up by a patron. For decades, the library has had to use its largest location — Central Library — as expensive storage space to accommodate items that can't fit in other branches.

With the centralization of some collections across the library system at the operations center, including from Central Library, we are making space for tailored, culturally relevant collections informed by the neighborhoods of those libraries. The library will be using circulation data and other measures to ensure that the vast majority of materials

moved from Central Library to the Operations Center are those that haven't been checked out in more than two years.

Perhaps most importantly, the shifts in how we distribute the library's collection allows for the creation of valuable community space that can be used for conversing, learning, creating and simply being. The libraries are for everyone and these new spaces demonstrate that value.

5) At last year's TSCC hearing, we discussed the sizable fund balance for the Library district deficit issues. But what about expenses and increased staffing? What work does the Library do to explore efficiencies to contain costs? What are examples of cost efficiency measures the library has taken in recent years?

(Katie Shifley)

Like any other industry, public library service is evolving and responding to community needs and the changing world we live in. With the construction of new spaces, we are taking the opportunity to examine our current staffing models to assess what staffing looks like in different buildings, rather than replicate our existing model. Even prior to the library bond projects, library leadership has a practice of reviewing vacancies as they arise to ensure that skill sets and roles are best aligned with organizational priorities.

The library has been, and will continue to be, very judicious about when and where we add ongoing costs. Each year we have a conversation about how to maintain the balance between our ongoing revenues and ongoing expenses.

The library has maintained good stewardship of taxpayer dollars through several efforts, such as ensuring excellent ongoing maintenance of its existing infrastructure and materials. Library buildings have been kept updated, and we will continue to support appropriate annual maintenance and condition assessments to ensure the longevity of these significant infrastructure investments.

As discussed earlier, the library is centralizing some of its service with the opening of the new Operations Center, which will also create efficiencies in our material movement and storage costs and other administrative processes, and allow for easier access to mid and East County where we provide many services. The historical lack of physical space in libraries created, out of necessity, additional outreach costs to ensure those services that couldn't take place inside library buildings could still happen via external spaces and partnerships. Now we have the opportunity to bring some library and community services inside the library— a benefit to patrons and a responsible use of library resources.

a) Follow up: What efficiencies will the bond projects bring that contain future costs?

(Katie Shifley)

The thoughtful design of each library building, and the spaces within, are constructed with long-term sustainability and efficiencies in mind. First, the library buildings will have more overall space, but a lower average age of the buildings.

This means minimized maintenance costs into the future. All of the new library building projects are expected to be certified as LEED gold, substantially improving levels of energy efficiency. These upgrades will mean energy cost savings. We are also planning for electric vehicle infrastructure investments for our library fleet vehicles to reduce costs and climate impact and maximize efficiency.

The Operations Center is likely to receive Energy Trust of Oregon's Net Zero certification, and we're adding photovoltaic panels to 4 projects.

Additionally, the open space design created by lowering shelf heights and creating improved entrance and exits, means staff will be able to see across more space than in older buildings with tall shelving and tight corner spaces.

The introduction of automated materials handling systems in libraries, and more significantly, in the new Operations Center, will change work flows and reduce repetitive motion injuries. These modernizations can lead to contained costs as they improve staff health and safety.

- 6) Last year we spoke about how libraries are changing post-pandemic, and the board mentioned an opportunity for the Library to partner with Multnomah County Health Department's Behavioral Health Unit to ensure more seamless connection to social services for library patrons in need. Can you tell us more about this? Is this work that is happening currently, or perhaps in the works for the future? If it is currently underway, how is this going?**

(Annie Lewis)

We've had conversations with Behavioral Health Services to figure out how and where they can bring their services to people in the library. These conversations are still in progress, as our current cramped spaces make it difficult to accommodate these resources in a substantive way. We expect that with our new, more flexible spaces, we will have better opportunities for partnership. We recognize that a lot of people served via the Health Department, and particularly through Behavior Health, are also patrons we see in the libraries. We will continue to explore how we can connect and support more behavioral health expertise in library spaces, and thus far, health colleagues have been receptive about working together.

The library has an ongoing contract with Cascadia Behavioral Health and has seen great success in having community resource counselors at Central Library, as well as guidance for other library branches. We've talked with other library systems about their use of peer support navigators, and are beginning to research what that might look like in our system.

We continue to provide appropriate training for library staff to help patrons that may need additional support using the library or locating appropriate services. However, library staff are limited in what they can provide in terms of mental health services, and we know it's critically important we continue to advance partnerships with agencies and departments that have these expertise and resources.

7) What do you see as the biggest challenges on the horizon for libraries?

(Annie Lewis)

At the risk of overstating it, ***the public library is changing and evolving***. While that has been happening for a while, new library spaces will transform how we use and think about an institution that's largely served people in the same way for more than 150 years. It is tremendously exciting. But it will be a challenge and take time for some to experience a new way of using and understanding the library.

Another challenge facing libraries is identifying the ways in which the library can adequately meet social safety and service needs. As was discussed earlier, establishing and maintaining partnerships with medical and mental health professionals will be critical to the sustainability of providing those kinds of support.

We also know that this transformation is essential not just for our own Multnomah County community, but also as a signal to communities around the country challenging the value and role of libraries. It is painful to watch as other library systems - including here in Oregon - face escalated threats of censorship, defunding, and book banning— a fight that has turned beloved community institutions into bargaining chips of social and political discourse.

We're fortunate and grateful to Multnomah County for supporting its libraries, and we will continue to honor the trust and investment of residents and patrons by providing library resources and services that meet the needs of the community.

8) ASK ONLY IF TIME We see there is \$1.4 million in the fiscal year 24 Approved budget dedicated for special projects that will be placed in a special subfund at the County specifically for navigating temporary space, technology, and other needs arising from the capital bond program. Is the bond unable to pay these costs, were these new or unanticipated costs, and will this be needed for the next several years to meet costs outside the bond?

(Katie Shifley)

Yes, we have a handful of projects next fiscal year that are included in a new program offer. These projects are part of the library's **operational** needs resulting from the bond work. An example of this is the Continuity of Library Services project, which is really all about mitigating service level impacts in the community during temporary bond closures.

We're standing up community technology spaces, and having a semi-permanent location for the Mobile Library. There are hard costs associated with this operational work that were not envisioned as part of the voter-approved bond; the library bond team is focused on ensuring that bond resources are dedicated to the work of modernizing our new library spaces through construction and technology investments.

Another example of a project in the Library Special Projects program offer is a pilot for staff technology - from communications equipment to mobile computing solutions. We're using district funds for this work because it's staff-facing, and bond projects are really focused on community-facing improvements to the library system.

These are not new or unanticipated costs - the library has been planning for this work for over a year and half, and funding for these projects was included in the Library District FY 23 Adopted budget. The biggest change here is that we're budgeting for the temporary services, spaces and technology as part of the **County library budget**, as a stand alone program offer, to help with overall transparency and communication around this work.