

2009 State of the Library

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Last year I stood before you to chart the course for the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library under my administration. I had only been on board a few months, and was still trying to get a feel for this organization. And now, with about a year and a half under my belt, I am much more familiar with this great institution and am confident in, and pleased with, the direction we are headed.

Today, I am here to give you a report on the Library System's successes, challenges and activities of the past year; and also to provide a glimpse into, and some predictions about, the years ahead.

The most dramatic impact on our system over the past year is the result of public activity. We measure many things. For example: how many people walk through our doors each day, how many books, magazines, music CD's, books on CD's, DVD's, and downloadable content is borrowed (and returned) each day, how many computer sessions occur each day, how often people visit our web site, use the online catalog, call for reference help or general information, request materials through Inter Library Loan or our online catalog, how many people ask reference questions and how many people attend programs.

In busy times, you might expect one or two, or even several of these usage figures to increase. We have seen dramatic increase in ALL of our activity measurements. Not one usage measure is decreasing or even remaining static. And this increase has been continuous for the past two years.

Here are some numbers to illustrate this trend:

- Through August at the Central Library: we have logged 342,853 visits in 2009. In 2008, throughout the entire System (including Central) 3,182,862 visits were counted; more than three visits per year for every man, woman and child in this county. That's more than the attendance at major sporting events, or movies or other cultural and entertainment events.
- Through August, cardholders have borrowed 5,393,568 items to date in 2009. That figure represents a 4.2% increase over last year, which was in turn up from 2007.
- Through July of this year, we have logged 474,130 sessions on public computers throughout the county; that figure is up 7% from 2008 and we have already exceed the 2007 total session count (438,352) in 7 months of the year. Part of the

increase can be attributed to additional computers and an easier sign-in/registration process, but this increase shows how much our community wants, and needs, these free computing resources.

And while the activity has been dramatic in Buffalo, we are not the only area experiencing this increase. Public libraries across the country are seeing usage increase; as economic vitality decreases, library use increases; that's a historical trend.

There have been stories by major news and media outlets about this trend in the NYTimes, WSJ, CNN and covered by our local news. You might be wondering, how do we compare to other libraries? When you look at collections and usage we're at the top of the heap; we hold a larger collection than most of our peer group libraries of similar size and we have one of the highest rates of borrowing per cardholder in our peer group (25 items per cardholder annually).

All this activity is a positive sign that libraries, and in particular Erie County libraries, are relevant, vibrant, trusted institutions, and form not only a safety net, but a warm and welcoming public space where everyone is treated equally.

People are rediscovering libraries, and finding that the library is not the place it used to be: libraries are dynamic, busy, bustling places that serve a vital role in the fabric of society and in the sustainability of a community.

In the past year, we have focused on meeting the increased demands of this amplified volume of activity, and continued to energize the community and the staff about the library's current, enhanced and new services and opportunities. And we're doing this without any increases, and in many cases decreases, in our levels of staffing.

Public service is our ultimate mission. We are here for you, the public, the community. Our services, collections and programs need to reflect the things our communities and our users want and need and value. In many cases, this means a change of focus for our staff. It means reworking models, changing workflows, shifting positions, introducing new technologies, offering new content. We've already experienced quite a bit of this change throughout the past year.

We are reorganizing almost every aspect of our institution so we are staged and ready to deliver what our public wants and needs, so we can be flexible, proactive and collaborative.

Two elements of the current restructuring plan include changing service models and technology enhancements. We are introducing RFID (Radio Frequency Identification and Detection) technology, thanks to a \$1.7 Million Erie County Fiscal Stability Authority efficiency grant, in the eight buffalo branches, Central Library and four

Amherst libraries. This technology is now up and running at the North Park Branch Library, and will be online at the other libraries within the next 18 months. RFID technology will enable more effective material handling capabilities (speedier check out and check in and routing between libraries), easier restocking of shelves, and enhanced self-service capabilities for our users. This results in cost savings for us over time through attrition, as tasks become less labor intensive. More importantly, it leads to better public service and better control of our inventory.

Staffing service models have started to shift from a decentralized, departmental, facility-based model to a systematic, centrally administered model. We have started to create a team structure that will address system-wide services and administration such as public programming. We have streamlined system services by combining departments, for example the marriage of technical services (material acquisitions, cataloging, processing) and network services to create the Information Technology department. We have combined reference service desks at the Central Library to give users a 'one-stop' service point for assistance with research and reference.

We are a library system, and are using that structure to develop collaborative workflows across the county, to achieve economies of scale and ensure consistent quality of service.

On the service front, the Library is focused on three key initiatives, which are all approached with eye to creating and developing lasting community partnerships. Our three key initiatives are literacy, special collections and economic development support efforts.

The Library's literacy plan helps to address the critical literacy needs facing Erie County. Our literacy initiative is focused on three major service areas: family literacy, after-school services and basic adult reading skills. The plan includes the creation of Library Literacy Centers throughout the county. Our intent is to create literacy services in partnership with established service organizations, not to reinvent the wheel or unnecessarily duplicate current efforts. What we bring to the table is this: B&ECPL has 37 locations in Erie County, each stocked with books, professional staff, computers, study tables, convenient hours, and in many cases meeting, program or study rooms. Our resources are primed to be used to house, promote and foster literacy efforts and programs throughout the County.

We are looking forward to offering Family Place™ in four of our libraries (which will be the first LLC's) in 2010 funded by a grant from NY State. This effort brings an important experience full circle for me; my first library job was at the Middle Country Public Library in Centereach NY, which is where Family Place was created almost 20 years ago. Family Place is now a national program, is established in 22 states, and has been adopted by major library systems, such as the Los Angeles public library system.

We are working on long term collaborative planning with ProjectFlight, a 'quiet giant' of the local literacy scene to introduce Family Place, and to help with our other literacy planning efforts. While best known for their Book Bank/Book Nook programs, ProjectFlight also leads literacy efforts throughout the world, provides educational and consulting services, works with partner schools, trains and tutors new literacy teachers, and helps in any capacity where their expertise and passion is needed.

We are also planning a long term collaborative partnership with Literacy Volunteers. Many Literacy Volunteer tutors currently use B&ECPL facilities to meet students, and several libraries host Literacy Volunteer drop in centers. But we hope to forge an even greater relationship for programming and long term planning. We envision Literacy Volunteers, along with established partner, Buffalo Adult Education, playing an integral role in our goal of providing basic adult reading services in our library literacy centers. Buffalo Adult Education has already established programming in the Central Library, and is working with us on several additional programs in the planning stages.

The East Delevan Branch Library continues to serve as a Read to Succeed Buffalo Success Center. RTS has made great strides in early literacy services in the 14215 community, and we are pleased and proud to have one of our libraries play a part in their efforts.

I must also mention the assistance we have received from other community partners, which will continue to develop in the months and years to come. WNED has been incredibly supportive of our libraries, and has established a reading corner at the Dudley Branch Library. We were happy to be a part of their Kid Zone at Wing Fest, which featured a visit from an Electric Company cast member and an interactive tent of activities for families.

We are once again working with Just Buffalo Literary Center as a partner in our Big Read programming, which kicks off right after this presentation. We are thankful to WBFO for their ongoing support of so many of our efforts, and for co-hosting the Lunchtime at the Library author visits featuring fascinating authors (podcasts on our website!) earlier this year. The Buffalo Museum of Science provides quality science literacy programming at our City Branch Libraries through its Branched Out program; and the Explore and More children's museum provides science programming in our county libraries.

Our focus on literacy also includes the two-year Get Graphic program, funded by a state Family Literacy Grant; Its goal was to attract at-risk readers and reading-reluctant teens to develop literacy skills, and a love of reading through graphic novels (i.e. comic books.) We just concluded two years of excellent programming and author visits, collection development and partnership development; it was a tremendous success.

This multi-agency collaborative program was recently awarded the WNY Library Resources Council's Outstanding Program Award for 2009.

Our second key initiative is a renewed focus on our special collections. Last year, I made the case for why we needed to focus on our library system's treasures, and this year I'm proud to tell you how we are doing it. We are dedicating significant resources to ensure our success. We have created a new division of special collections with the charge of developing a long-range plan to address: conservation, preservation, exhibition, collaboration, marketing, cultural tourism and funding opportunities. The planning process is well underway. Concurrently, the new division has jumped right in to create exciting and dynamic exhibitions including the Alexander Hamilton Exhibition on display earlier this year. That exhibit featured several of the library's most treasured items, including Thomas Jefferson's personal and annotated copy of *The Federalist*. We hosted noted Hamilton scholar Richard Brookheiser for a presentation, and offered programs such as a panel discussion, art discussion with a scholar from the Albright-Knox, and author visits. The big 'hits' of the exhibit were the two life-size figures of the dueling Hamilton and Burr, as well as replicas of the pistols used in *The Duel*. We worked with Buffalo State College, the BEC Historical Society Old Fort Niagara, Hamilton College and JP Morgan Chase on that project.

Our current exhibition, *Double Stars: Men and Women of Astronomy*, is a celebration of the International Year of Astronomy. It features a few of the scientific wonders of our Milestones collection, including works by Galileo and Tycho Brahe. Award winning author Dava Sobel was at the Library last week and presented a fascinating program about her work, which includes the books, *Galileo's Daughter*, *Longitude* and her most recent book, *The Planets*.

Coming this fall, we will be partnering with the University of Buffalo libraries and the Buffalo Zoo on, *Darwin: The Origin of Influence*. We are recognizing the 150th anniversary of the publishing of the *Origin of Species*, and the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth. This will be an exciting, interesting and thought-provoking look at who influenced Darwin, and who has been influenced by Darwin, in science and in literature. As well as a showcase of unique works and objects related to Darwin here in Western New York.

We were recently awarded a \$25,000 planning grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to develop an interactive, digital history project based on the era of the Great Depression and the New Deal in Western New York which will feature items from our collections and showcase the importance of Buffalo's cultural treasures created by Works Project Administration-era funding.

The treasures of the library system are by no means only housed at the Central Library. The Frank E Merriweather library houses a very important collection of African American history and research resources, including primary source material such as

photographs and funeral programs; it also has the Schomberg Clipping File on microfiche. Many of our other libraries have collections of historical and cultural significance, including the Lackawanna Library, which houses the Steel Plant Museum. All of our resources and treasures will be considered in our plans for the future, and as part of our commitment to preserving, collecting and exhibiting the wonders of our libraries and of the community.

We are thankful for County Executive Collins' vocal support of and interest in our special collections, and his plans to convene a Rare Books Commission to collaboratively plan for the future of our communities' treasures. These collections can, and should play an important role in enhancing cultural, historical and genealogical tourism in Erie County.

Both our literacy and special collections initiatives will have an impact on the economic development of Buffalo and Erie County. A more literate society is a more productive society; literacy skills are directly correlated to job attainment, retaining employment, as well as educational success and civic engagement.

Our special collections can be a part of the tourism efforts in the area, especially when partnered with other community activities and in conjunction with the CVB.

But the library can, and does, assist with more hands on economic development efforts through workforce support. We are offering computer classes to assist people develop their skills, we have resume materials and a powerful resume software product to assist job seekers polish their presentations and get ready for interviews. We offer civil service exam information and study guides, help people locate the job searching and career resource information they need, and even assist people in submitting online application forms.

We host groups, such as the Parachute Group and SCORE that provide support for the out-of-work or those in the middle of a career-change or are looking to start businesses; we make referrals to social service agencies and help identify additional workforce development resources. Our Libraries are often a first stop for people unsure of where to find help in the community. The Library is a trusted, free, open and available community resource where people turn for help. Our services directly impact economic development: not only do we attract visitors to our locations, which support other local services, but we are providing resources to enable skill development and job searching assistance.

And don't just take my word for this. A recent study from [The Planning Commissioner's Journal](#) (how nice to see someone outside the library world write about us!) has published a detailed article on how libraries bring economic value to the communities they serve. According to their article, libraries are a retail and service

industry anchor, and often draw more visitors than a small to medium size department store. The article points out that public buildings create identity, a sense of community, and a sense of place.

A library is a destination, where people have a positive experience. Libraries can be, as we hope to be, in partnership with other economic development projects so that we can leverage the visitors and usage of our libraries into increased opportunities for the communities we serve.

That is a brief overview of the Library system's three key service initiatives. In addition to these areas, we also administer many other projects, programs and areas of the System.

In particular, the facilities within our Library System boast successes and concerns. We were able to secure state capital matching funds for a number of county and city libraries in 2008 and 2009. We have also applied for additional funding for 2010 for eight additional library projects. The Central Library and many City branch libraries have seen improvements in the past year, as have several county libraries including the Boston, Amherst, Cheektowaga, Orchard Park, Clarence, Elma, City of Tonawanda and Grand Island libraries. Eight more libraries are pending approval for 2010 state funding.

But challenges remain for communities that cannot secure the 50% match required for state capital funding requests. Advocacy efforts on the state level are aimed at provide a means to lower the matching threshold for less affluent communities which would enable us to secure more funding for capital improvements for those libraries and communities less able to fund capital improvements.

As you may recall, the North Park Branch Library was closed in April of 2008 because of environmental concerns related to the facility. I am pleased to report that a new North Park branch facility was opened yesterday. It is a bright, open welcoming space. It features our first installation of RFID technology, lots of computers, ample parking and will be the only branch open on Friday evenings. We are pleased to restore library services to this community and showcase a new approach to delivering library services.

We have seen success in our ability to meet increased demand, introduce new technology, maintain facilities, secure grant funding for pilot and innovative programs and develop collaborative community partnerships. However, the Library has encountered challenges, particularly in regard to funding.

What awaits us on the road ahead?

We need to be vigilant in our vocal and financial support of libraries in Erie County. You don't have to look too far to see crisis situations in libraries happening each day. Ohio, once the envy of all libraries regarding funding, is weathering terrible financial difficulties. The news from Philadelphia is that they were on the brink of closure until funding was restored – two weeks before all libraries would have been closed. These libraries have seen increased use, too. These libraries offer the kinds of services we're offering. NY City libraries faced a significant funding reduction scenario that was only partially restored in funding negotiations with the Mayor.

We face our own struggles for sustained funding. Our crisis hit in 2005 and 2006, leading to the closing of libraries and reduction of services. We are still dealing with the aftermath of that crisis. Thankfully, some funding was restored in 2007, and in 2008, but that funding could not be sustained in 2009. The cost savings we anticipate from our attrition-based workforce reductions and efficiencies through restructuring and RFID implementations will enable us to sustain current levels of service through 2011, if all funding (county and state) stays level; but level still means cuts, as expenses continue to rise.

The Library is using significant levels of cash reserves to balance the 2009 and projected 2010 budgets. We will not have the reserves to do this to the same degree in 2011 and beyond. Revenue is static or shrinking, expenses are on the rise. This is an issue our board is already discussing, and will develop plans to address this issue over the next months and years so we can avoid a crisis and be proactive in our approach to addressing these cautionary signs.

Developing additional sources of revenue is vital. Our Development Office has led efforts over the past two years that show charitable giving can and should be an important source of support. The 2008/2009 Annual Fund raised over \$60,000 dollars from 1,355 donors. This is more than double the number of donors, and is almost double the total dollar amount, from the previous year's Annual Fund.

Non-annual fund donations in 2008 and to date in 2009 have contributed almost \$140,000 dollars to the Library. This support is provided by the Library Foundation, corporate donors and sponsors, through bequests (including one \$60,000 bequest and one \$20,000 bequest), foundations and groups, fundraising events (like the upcoming Gatsby Rendezvous) and unsolicited gifts. Our development efforts are good and getting better, but these efforts take many years to grow and build significant private fund resources.

The Library Foundation of Buffalo and Erie County is a key partner in our development efforts, and has recently relocated its office to the Central Library. They are working hand-in-hand with the library staff to ensure there is no duplication of effort and so that

we can focus on areas of strength regarding fundraising and development planning efforts together.

While we do face funding challenges, I refuse to have our library system defined only by this issue. We have many reasons for optimism and many reasons to be proud of what we offer. The Central Library is the flagship institution of this system, and not only houses a public library but also houses the system-wide services made available to all libraries in Erie County. It serves as an anchor for downtown (and is a great lunch spot) and for facilitating partnerships and collaborative ventures.

We are currently reviewing proposals for a Central Library space use study. We are looking for a creative outlook, an innovative approach to gathering community insight and developing a plan for the use of facility in the future that could provide an entirely new role for the library in Downtown Buffalo.

Our special collections are one-of-a-kind and are internationally significant. We will be a key destination for cultural, historical and genealogical tourism in years to come.

New partnerships breathe new life into 'traditional' library services. Exciting ideas from new partnerships within our community and state challenge us to step up to the plate and offer new and innovative services.

Technology will continue to play a huge role in our marketing, service development, communications and service delivery efforts. In only a few short weeks, we have attracted hundreds of followers on Facebook and on Twitter. A technology survey request sent to our email message list generated over 700 responses in 24 hours. We are harnessing the power of new technology to reach our users, potential users and potential partners.

There is a renewed interest in and usage of public library services throughout our country. Libraries are no longer antiquated reading rooms full of dusty tomes (we still have reading rooms, but the books aren't dusty in our libraries). We are relevant, timely and are an essential component of our democracy. No other country provides the kind of public access to information that American libraries do. We take that for granted, but what other public institution offers all this, for free, to everyone? And at such a reasonable cost. That is a wonderful thing, a truly wonderful, American thing.

So let us not define ourselves by financial issues alone, but be realistic in our approach to the future. We all need to be open minded and flexible about what services we provide, how we are staffed, where libraries are located, what kind of material we provide and in what format. We need to insure that our community has access to the resources we provide, in the most convenient way possible and at the most reasonable cost. And we will need to seek additional support from our community, through our

fundraising efforts as well as through increased public support. I can't do this alone. I need the help and support of our trustees, staff, community leaders, stakeholders, users and residents. This is your library system, we all need to be part of the effort to ensure its future and make sure we fulfill the potential this historic institution offers us.

What should you take home with you today, after listening so patiently for the past half an hour? I hope what you have heard is this:

Buffalo and Erie County Public Library System is a dynamic, thriving library system with many layers of activity, programs and planning. I hope you have heard that while there is reason to heed troubling signs about our financial future, we cannot hide or retrench, we must look to define a new future. And for that I need your help and progressive ideas, your willingness to approach opportunities and challenges with new eyes and a fresh outlook. I hope you leave feeling inspired and excited by what the library system has to offer, the direction we are headed, and our potential to be a leading, world-class library system.

In closing, I want to extend a sincere thanks to the entire B&ECPL staff for their hard work, dedication and loyalty; to the board of trustees of the Library System, to the board members of all our contracting member libraries, and to all the friends groups, volunteers, vendors, partners and appointed and elected officials that work with us on a daily basis. This is a community library, one you all have a stake in supporting and maintaining, and one I know you care deeply about. And I also know you won't mind when I call upon you to help me chart the course from here on in.

Thank you for joining me today.