



Erie County Legislature – Finance, Management & Budget 2021 Committee Hearing
Tuesday, November 17, 2020
11:00 a.m.

Testimony by:

Kathleen Berens Bucki, Chair, B&ECPL Board of Trustees
Mary Jean Jakubowski, System Director
Kenneth Stone, Chief Financial Officer

Kathleen Berens Bucki, Chair, B&ECPL Board of Trustees: Good morning. Thank you for having us here today. On behalf of the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library System Board of Trustees, please accept our sincerest appreciation for your time and support.

[Recognize any trustees in attendance]

As I am sure you agree, these are challenging times and this year has been like no other. I am proud to say that the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library's administration and staff have worked and continue to work tirelessly and creatively to provide traditional library services, create new ways to access library resources and conduct programs that enrich, enlighten and entertain.

When the pandemic hit in March, our libraries took action, adapting to the rapidly changing situation by developing procedures to create a safe environment while continuing to provide library services. As Governor Cuomo imposed workforce reductions which significantly impacted on-site library operations, Library Boards throughout the System made the difficult decision to close buildings until such time as the Governor supported reopening. Continuing our Mission and reaching our community, however, remained at the forefront and our libraries remained open virtually. New policies were put in place and many staff were able to work remotely providing access to library resources, expanding eCollections, answering reference questions and conducting virtual programming and training – even a virtual Job Fair. The System maintained the library's online catalog, borrower accounts, network operations and library website. WiFi remained accessible outside our buildings 24/7. Communication with our constituents was equally important, with many notifications being sent, posted and published regarding the extension of due dates for borrowed materials, overdue fines/fees being suspended, availability of online services and programming, etc.

Pursuant to New York Forward, our libraries began to reopen in June under a variety of state-mandated restrictions. While the newly established access points and online

services continued, libraries also began new operations, offering, for example, walk-up and/or curbside service so that library patrons could receive library materials from the comfort and safety of their own vehicles without the concern of human contact.

As the Governor's restrictions were further lifted, our doors reopened, albeit under new health and safety protocols. Library patrons have returned. Computers are humming; materials are being borrowed. Staff continue to provide online trainings, programs, lectures and more.

We know that the world has changed and recognize that our services must therefore continue to be modified to the ever evolving circumstances in which our communities must function. We are here to serve. Our libraries will continue to provide the library services and resources needed by the members of our communities. To make it possible for them to do so, I come before you today to ask for your support of the County Executive's 2021 proposed budget.

Thank you again for your time and consideration. I will now ask Mary Jean to continue with our testimony...Mary Jean...

Mary Jean Jakubowski, System Director: Good morning. First let me say thank you to each of you for your ongoing support.

COVID-19 has most certainly put a strain on all of us. Who knew last year when I said "2020 will bring a new adventure for the libraries in our System" that the new adventure would come in the form that it did.

It goes without question, this year has been challenging. And with any challenge, you will have those who choose to sit idle waiting for the challenge to resolve and those who rise to the occasion. I believe, and hope you will agree, that the libraries of the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library System have done just that – risen to the occasion – putting and keeping our communities in the forefront and finding new ways to continue library services even during the darkest times of this pandemic. I would like to take a moment to applaud our staff, administration and trustees for ALL the work they continue to do for library patrons and our communities. Thank you, everyone.

Now, if this honorable body will please indulge me for a few minutes, I would like to share with you a few of the things we did to adapt to our "new normal," along with some of the positive outcomes which resulted.

Through the creation of eLibrary cards, including the newly introduced Student Digital Library Card, the number of library cardholders in Erie County has increased by more than 14,000 since this time last year, to over 392,000 – and the number keeps growing.

eResources were used heavily during our closure and the trend continues today. Anticipating a significant increase in use, our Collections Development team rapidly purchased additional eBooks and eAudiobooks, over 11,000 titles equating to 16,450 plus volumes, between March and October to provide a greater variety and faster access to eMaterials of all genres. By the end of May, we saw a 60% increase in eBook usage over the same period of the previous year and nearly a 36% increase for all of 2020. Our eCollections now have over 123,000 items, and we continue to shift resources so that these collections can continue to expand.

When our libraries closed on March 17th, we had no idea how long the closure would last. No one knew how rapidly COVID-19 would spread and the toll it would take on our communities. From day one, our staff kept library services operating. Within a week, library programs moved to virtual platforms. Programs ranged from storytimes to Cooking with a Librarian, from How to use Zoom to adult and teen social and book clubs. And some familiar faces – including members of this honorable body – participated, reading children’s books which were enjoyed by hundreds. Response to our virtual programs has been overwhelming, with attendance reaching 288,544 through October – an impressive number, as it exceeds traditional program attendance for all of 2019.

Throughout, we also played a significant role in promoting the 2020 Census – reaching out to patrons and partners and working with the Census Bureau and many elected officials to get everyone counted. Our telephone and email reference services were redirected, and staff manned phone lines and answered email from home. We provided and distributed thousands of books to shut-ins, including seniors and hospitals. The Leroy R. Coles, Jr. Branch Library was repurposed as a drive-through COVID-19 testing site. Our staff participated in virtual meetings and training programs, produced resource guides, completed mandatory state reports, monitored the rapidly changing environment, conducted deep cleaning, maintained networks, advised staff, trustees, patrons... the list goes on and on.

I would be remiss, however, if I did not take a few minutes to point out that the Library has most certainly been subject to negative consequences brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, both financially and operationally. For the financial impact, there’s uncertainty in state aid, loss of revenue, PPE costs, etc. I have asked Ken Stone to further address these areas during his portion of today’s presentation.

From an operational standpoint.... Daily our staff are facing various stressors and changes in routines and everyday library activities, many are juggling work and home-schooling, we continue to have many part-time staff who have yet to be scheduled for work (136), and we have several vacancies that we are holding open because of budget uncertainty. And yet, to the credit of library employees throughout the System, staff

remain dedicated, dependable, professional, creative and forward thinking – willing to continue, as Governor Cuomo says, “ever upward” for the benefit of our communities.

Like nearly all businesses and cultural organizations, our in-house use is down, as is use of our public access computers. Because of Executive Orders, we are not providing traditional in-person programming and all but a few meeting rooms have been transformed into materials quarantine sites, thus all but eliminating public use.

At last year’s hearing I stated: “libraries today are less about what they ‘have’ for people and more about what they ‘do’ for people.” This could not be more pertinent this year. Recently, we put out a survey asking members of the community how they are using library services, what they need in library services, whether or not are they aware libraries are open, have they visited, why haven’t they [visited], etc. We received over 6,100 responses. Here are a few examples of what was submitted:

“Your eResources have been a lifeline during the pandemic. I use Libby all the time.”

“I thank God for the library.”

“Libraries are awesome, especially for people who don’t have computers.”

“I’m so glad that the library is open again.”

“I look forward to the end of the pandemic so I can make in-person visits to the two branch libraries near my home.”

“We love our library. While we could not attend, I read at least 10 books using Libby and read an additional 10 from the same source to my husband.”

“Because of COVID I won’t visit. I download books to read.”

I think it is clear, despite the pandemic and the modifications of daily living, libraries continue to enhance and transform lives. Whether services be through a traditional or new format, in-house or virtual, our libraries continue as economic incubators, lifelong learning centers, providers of educational resources, gateways to entertainment, relief from the day’s turmoil, providers of opportunities for human connection, and, for many, links to the world of discovery and information.

Bottom line – we’re busy – maybe in a different way, but we’re busy. Be assured our staff and administration will continue to work very hard to meet the demands of your constituents. And further be assured we will continue to explore new ways to do so. The proposed capital budget includes funding for a van-sized vehicle which, if

approved, will provide us with an opportunity to expand our outreach to senior centers, group homes and shut-ins.

The 2021 operating budget proposed by County Executive Poloncarz contains an increase of \$508,000, 2% above 2020. We are grateful for the proposed budget, and, if approved, we will use the additional funding to offset increases in retirement costs, minimum wage and use of fund balance. We, therefore, kindly ask for your support of the County Executive's proposed 2021 operating budget.

For more specific budgetary details, including the capital budget proposal, I have asked Ken Stone to prepare some remarks. Ken....

Kenneth Stone, Chief Financial Officer: Thank you for the opportunity to provide an overview of the Library's 2021 budget request as we all work together through these trying times.

The Proposed 2021 Operating Budget, shown in Budget Book A beginning on page 335, sustains core library operations and services in the face of unprecedented revenue challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lower revenue from library operations combine with a 12.3% estimated loss in New York State aid, which are partially offset by the 2.0% increase in County support, leading to a net \$392,354 (1.3%) decrease overall.

Library recurring grants, budgeted separately starting on page 85 in Budget Book B, also reflect a 12.3% estimated loss in New York State aid.

This projection assumes a partial recovery of the 20% withholding of State aid we have experienced so far in 2020. Both may very well worsen if New York State's fiscal situation worsens.

Staffing counts are modestly lower, with a net 2 full-time positions eliminated through attrition during 2020, reducing the total going into 2021, along with a combined 16 operating and grant vacant part-time positions eliminated when compared to the 2020 Adopted Budget.

Costs include 2 to 2.5% contractual 2021 cost-of-living adjustments for those bargaining units with agreements; a \$0.70 per hour (5.9%) increase in the New York State minimum wage; step increases; and up to 2.5% for managerial/confidential personnel.

It is important to note that the very much appreciated 2.0% increase in County support helps sustain core library services in the face of these revenue and cost challenges. The

proposed budget before you relies upon \$373,317 in use of fund balance and a salary savings credit of \$671,445 for a combined total of \$1,044,762 to balance. That's 3.6% of our operating budget. Without the additional County support, that total would have been \$1,552,945, which is 5.4% of our operating budget. That level is not sustainable.

Given that the property tax base is estimated to grow by 9%, the 2021 Library Tax rate will once again decrease modestly.

The Library's proposed budget is summarized in the 2021 *Budget in Brief Charts* handout.

The charts show 10+ years of data and trends for major revenue, expenditures, personnel and service levels. They also provide breakouts specific to 2021 Budget revenue and expenditures, a chart showing example property tax information for a town and village property owner, peer group comparison data and a chart estimating the value of library services received in 2019. The latter shows an estimated \$4.59 return in service value per dollar of Library Tax funding.

These charts, along with budget narratives and additional detail, have been posted to the Library's website, accessible by searching for "*BECPL Budget Information*".

Finally, Erie County's Capital Budget includes funding to ensure assets function well into the future. While not part of the Library's Operating Budget, Erie County Capital funds have been included in the County's 2021 Recommended Capital Budget, described on page 129 of Book B.

These funds support improvements to the County-owned downtown Central Library and to System-related improvements, specifically:

- \$1,000,000 in County funding towards a \$1.3 million project for Central Library Escalator Demolition, Space Renovations and Asbestos Abatement; and
- \$140,000 for a Flexible Use Bookmobile/Outreach Vehicle.

With that, I thank you for your interest and support.

Chair Bucki, Director Jakubowski and I would be happy to answer your questions.