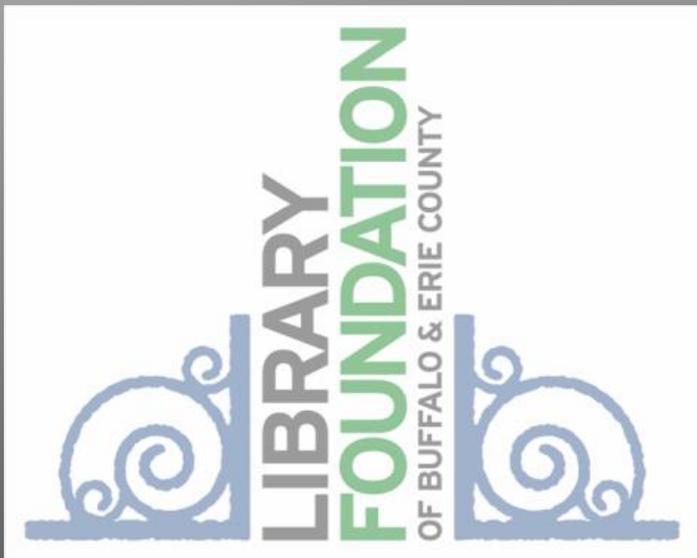




# Buffalo and Erie County Public Library

## Use and Perception Survey

### 2013



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The Siena College Research Institute (SRI) conducted a use and perception survey on behalf of the Library Foundation of Buffalo & Erie County (LFB&EC) with 620 Erie County registered voters between November 17 and November 21, 2013. Data in this report, as well as in the attached frequencies and cross tabulations, is reported at the 95% confidence level with a margin of error of +/- 3.9.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Key Findings: Library Use and Perception**

- 73% of Erie County voters have a Library<sup>2</sup> Card.
  - Women have a Library card at a rate (78%) greater than that of men (68%).
  - Voters with a college education and those earning more than \$50,000 a year have Library cards at rates greater than those without a college degree and those earning less than \$50,000.
- 79% of voters use the Library.
  - 37% use the Library at least once a month. 42% use the Library either very infrequently, about once a year, or more than that, about two or three times a year.
  - Of those with Library cards, use is greater with only 7% not using the Library at all and as many as 47% of those with Library cards using the Library on a monthly basis.
  - Of those without a Library Card, 10% use the Library on a monthly basis and 32% use the Library intermittently. 58% of those without a Library Card, 15% of all voters, do not use the Library.
- While borrowing books, cited by 68% of all voters, is the most cited Library use, 24% of all voters use a public computer at the Library, 20% access online databases through the Library, 19% attend programming and 14% download EBooks.
- 82% of all voters and 91% of those with Library cards say that the Library is at least somewhat (26% of all, 26% with cards) or very (56% of all, 65% with cards) important to them.
- Currently, 88% have a favorable opinion of the Library, while only 7% have an unfavorable opinion. The Library is seen more favorably than other institutions in the community including: Erie Community College (86% favorable/7% unfavorable), Erie County Department of Parks, Recreation and Forestry (71/17), Buffalo Olmstead Parks Conservancy (70/9), Erie County Sheriff's Department (63/31), Erie County Highway Department (61/27), Erie County Arts and Cultural Advisory Board (51/15) and the Erie County Legislature (41/47).

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<sup>1</sup> The margin of error (MOE) for sub samples are in all cases greater than +/- 3.9 and are either noted in this report or available upon request.

<sup>2</sup> All references to Library are references to the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library

- Compared to seven other aspects of life in Buffalo and Erie County, the quality of public libraries is rated equal to one other – the quality of local cultural attractions – and better than the other six:

| Life Aspect   | Excellent or Good | Fair or Poor |
|---|-------------------|--------------|
| <b>Quality of Libraries</b>                                 | <b>71%</b>        | <b>20%</b>   |
| Quality of local cultural attractions                       | 70%               | 24%          |
| Job done by police to keep citizens safe                    | 64%               | 35%          |
| Condition of public parks and other recreational facilities | 55%               | 40%          |
| Condition of local roads, sidewalks and other public works  | 29%               | 70%          |
| How responsive local government is to the needs of citizens | 24%               | 70%          |
| Quality of our public schools                               | 21%               | 74%          |
| Ability to obtain suitable employment                       | 16%               | 77%          |

### Summary

**Overwhelmingly, the Library is well regarded by Erie County voters and seen as an important and regularly utilized institution within the community. The Library is as, or more highly thought of, than many other aspects of life in Erie County.**

### Key Findings: The Public Library District Initiative

- Only 10% of voters are aware of the initiative on the part of the Library to become a public library district.
  - 88% of all voters say that they are not aware of this initiative.
  - There is no meaningful change in awareness of the initiative among those with a Library card.
  - There is a slight increase of awareness among those that frequent the Library at least or more than once a month. Among that group, 15% are aware of the initiative.
- Prior to providing any information about the initiative to have the current Library become a public library district, 32% of respondents indicate being in favor of it while 13% are opposed. The majority, 56%, say they ‘don’t know’.
  - Of the 10% that are aware of the initiative, support is considerably higher with 57% of those that are aware of the initiative in support, while 31% are opposed and only 13% say that they ‘don’t know’.
  - Those that support the initiative are slightly more likely to have a library card (70% compared to 61%) and to more frequently use the Library than those that oppose the initiative.

- Respondents were offered three statements that provided them with information about the public library district initiative. In each case they were asked if knowing this piece of information made them more likely to, less likely to, or had no effect on their decision to support the initiative. The three statements were:
  - The library district, if approved by the voters would consolidate the current 37 libraries into one district. Individual libraries would retain their identity while their current board of trustees would transition to an advisory board. The Board of Trustees of the Library District would be elected by the voters and these elected trustees would not be compensated. [Elected Board]
  - Erie County voters will vote to not only establish the Library District but also to approve its initial funding. [Voters approve initial funding]
  - If the Library District is established with an initial budget, Erie County voters will continue to vote directly on the Library District’s public funding. [Voting continue on future funding]
    - In each case by nearly equal margins, a plurality of voters found each fact made them more likely to support the initiative.
      - [Elected Board]: 35% more likely, 18% less likely, 42% no effect.
      - [Voters approve initial funding]: 32% more/15% less/50% no effect.
      - [Voting continue on future funding]: 36% more/13% less/48% no effect.
    - While those that were in this survey initially in favor of the initiative are more convinced to support it after listening to these three statements and those initially opposed are little moved by them, the majority of voters that did not have an immediate position on the initiative do lean towards these statements moving them towards support. We show in the table below among those who initially voiced support, opposition or no position, the percentages that are, based on each question, more likely to support the initiative, less likely or still in need of more information.

|                             | In favor<br>(32%) | Opposed<br>(13%) | Don't know<br>(56%) | All      |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|------------------|---------------------|----------|
| Elected Board               | 39/15/47          | 27/22/52         | 36/19/46            | 35/18/47 |
| Voters approve funding      | 40/9/52           | 23/30/47         | 29/15/56            | 32/15/53 |
| Continue to approve funding | 46/7/47           | 22/27/52         | 33/14/53            | 36/14/51 |

- Another way of looking at the immediate impact of these three pieces of information on the likelihood of voters supporting the initiative is to create scores for each question and for the three questions as a whole. For each question, we score more likely as 1, less as -1, and no effect or don't know as 0. A score of 1 on any single question or of 3 for the total of the three questions would indicate that all respondents are more likely to support the initiative based on each of the statements.
- The overall scores are:
  - Elected board: .18
  - Voters approve initial funding: .17
  - Voting continue on future funding: .22
  - All statements: .57
- Each statement succeeds in moving the overall population towards support.
- Finally considering all three statements and looking at whether respondents score positively (are more likely), negatively (are less likely) or zero (they remain unaffected), we find that:
  - 22% are less likely to support the initiative
  - 31% remain unaffected
  - 47% are more likely to support it.
  - Importantly, of those that initially were undecided, 23% are less likely, 31% of those or 17% of all voters remain undecided and 47% are more likely based upon a projected analysis of the impact of these three statements.
- Respondents were then asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with four statements that we said were made by supporters and opponents of the Library District:
  - The Library District will provide our libraries with stable funding and keep all branches open: 64% agree (28% strongly), 26% disagree (9% strongly).
  - The Library District plan will guarantee taxpayers a voice in the libraries through the elected trustees: 66% agree (24% strongly), 26% disagree (11% strongly)
  - Establishing the Library District and removing its funding from the County budget will threaten other county services: 30% agree (10% strongly), 58% disagree (24% strongly).
  - Replacing the existing 23 library boards with one board is actually creating another layer of government: 44% agree (19% strongly), 48% disagree (24% strongly).
- A majority of voters hold the position to each of these statements that is shared by supporters of the Library District with the exception of the statement on 'another layer of government' which is split among public opinion.

- Again, we create a score for each statement that can range from 2 (strong agreement with the supporter position) to -2 (strong agreement with the opponent position).
- The scores for the four questions in rank order of collective support for the Library District position are:
  - Stable funding: .59
  - Taxpayer voice: .52
  - Threat to county services: .43 (note this must be read as collectively voters lean towards not thinking the District would threaten other services)
  - Layer of Government: .09 (note this must be read as collectively voters are on the fence as to whether the District would or would not be another layer of government).
- The overall score on these four statements which can range from + 8 (complete and strong agreement with the Library District supporters) to -8 is 1.63, indicating that the voters of Erie County as a whole share the Library District supporters views on these issues.
- Based on their answers to these four statements, we group respondents as:<sup>3</sup>
  - Strong supporter (score of 5 to 8) = 21%
  - Soft supporters (1- 4) = 43%
  - Undecided (0) = 14%
  - Soft opponents (-1 - -4) = 18%
  - Strong opponents (-5 - -8) = 5%
- Based on placing respondents into these groups derived from their position on the four support/opposition views, we cross tabulate them with the initial in favor of/opposed to question and find that based on their views:
  - Strong supporter s (21%) are in favor of the Library by 43% to 6% with 51% needing more information.
  - Soft supporters (43%) are in favor of the Library by 32% to 10% with 58% needing more information.
  - Undecideds (14%) are in favor of the Library by 24% to 15% with 61% needing more information.
  - Soft opponents (18%) are split with 25% in favor and 21% opposed.
  - Strong opponents (5%) are also split, 23% in favor and 23% opposed.
- This analysis demonstrates that the greatest positional weakness of the Library Initiative is the threat of installing another layer of government. More importantly, at least 64% of voters are, based on the most pertinent issues, predisposed to support the initiative. Among those that are poised to oppose the initiative based on their views, opposition is tepid judging from their breakeven poll numbers on the in favor/oppose initial question.

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<sup>3</sup> Percentages add to more than 100% due to rounding of each individual percentage.

- Finally, voters were asked: “Currently the Library is supported by about 1.6% of county taxes, about a penny and a half of every tax dollar of Erie County residents’ total tax bill. Would you support or oppose the Library District if the community based funding for the Library remained at the current level?”
- Overwhelmingly, now that they have been made aware of the initiative, shown its benefits and allowed to entertain the criticisms, voters support it with no funding increase at 76% in favor and 15% opposed. Based on the derived groups, 83% of both soft and strong supporters support this proposal while only 11% oppose it. Among ‘undecideds’ support is at 69% compared to 12% opposition and among opponents, support is still at 63% to 27% opposition.
- But, when we asked about support that would entail an increase in funding and the consequent tax increase specified at \$5.20 per \$100,000 of home value, overall support remains a majority but drops by nearly 20 points to 57% support to 37% opposition. Among the derived groups it is:
  - Strong supporters: 70% to 25%
  - Soft supporters: 60% to 33%
  - Undecided: 47% to 42%
  - Soft opponents: 43% to 54%
  - Strong opponents: 48% to 48%

## Conclusions

1. **Awareness of the Library District Initiative is Low.**
2. **A plurality of the public is inclined to support it.**
3. **Informing the public about 1) elective board members and consolidation, 2) voter ability to approve the initiative and its beginning funding and 3) voter control over any increase in funding makes voters more likely to support the initiative.**
4. **Voters tend to agree with the position of supporters more so than opponents on stable funding, taxpayer voice and that the Library District will not threaten other county services.**
5. **Voters are not sure as to whether the District would be another (negatively perceived) layer of government.**
6. **Informing the public, in fact, simply laying out the pertinent issues, increases support at current funding levels to 76%.**
7. **An increase in initial funding, even at a small level, leads to a significantly reduced level of support.**
8. **An aggressive and explicit public awareness campaign is called for that highlights protecting the well regarded and important asset – the Library, the initial and continuing voice afforded taxpayers and the fact that this funding does not threaten county service. Additionally, it would be prudent to face, quite directly, the anticipated charge of being another layer of government with a counter view of consolidation, efficiency and taxpayer control.**
9. **Any increased funding in the initial request must be carefully considered as it will give impetus to the opposition.**