

**Brooklyn Public Library**

**Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup Relations  
Committee on Libraries**

**September 30, 2013**

Good afternoon. My name is Linda Johnson and I am the President and CEO of Brooklyn Public Library (BPL). It is a pleasure to speak with you today about the potential for new and inspiring library facilities in Brooklyn. I will also address the Library's overwhelming capital construction needs.

Earlier this morning, I was joined by BPL staff and community members in Gerritsen Beach, where eleven long months after Hurricane Sandy, we delivered to that deserving community its newly renovated neighborhood branch library. We also are looking forward to reopening our storm-beaten but now beautifully renovated Coney Island branch next month. Gerritsen Beach Library looks absolutely stunning. We have added additional meeting rooms, and created a space much more hospitable to learning than it had been before the storm. We are doing the same at Coney Island. We are grateful to the Federal Emergency Management Agency for providing us the resources with which to rebuild. The question we ask ourselves every day is, what about the other 58 branch libraries in Brooklyn that are in dire need of renovation and modernization? How will we secure the resources to create the 21<sup>st</sup>-century learning environments that our communities want and deserve?

I have appeared before this committee many times to testify about the impact that budget cuts have had on our institution. I am very grateful to the Council that for the first time in five years, BPL did not receive a cut to its operating budget this past July. I have also told you many times about \$300 million in deferred capital maintenance across our

system. Our buildings are old and they are in crisis. Within the next several years, it will take less than a hurricane to shut down one or more of our libraries if we continue along the path that we have been going down for years – neglect, followed by band-aids, followed by more neglect. That cynical process needs to change and it needs to change immediately. We have all inherited a difficult situation but it is our responsibility to address it, not avoid it.

Nearly every one of our branches has maintenance issues. Attached is an appendix of our capital needs, broken down by branch and with council districts noted. We need to replace HVAC systems, boilers and roofs, make safety and security enhancements, and embark on interior renovations, among countless other projects. Last July, we were forced to close our libraries for a total of 270 hours because their air conditioning units simply could not handle the high temperatures. This amounts to 39 days of lost service. To make matters worse, these closures occurred when many of our libraries are supposed to act as cooling centers for the borough. Clearly, the status quo is unacceptable. As you know, we receive an average of only \$15 million a year from the City to maintain our buildings. We do receive badly needed assistance from some of you, for which we are grateful. Thank you in particular to Councilmembers Dilan, Gentile, Gonzales, Greenfield, Lander, Levin, Mealy, Recchia, Reyna, and Williams. We are also grateful for the ongoing support of Borough President Markowitz. But your funding alone cannot solve our \$300 million hole. We need additional strategies – and we need more capital. We have come up with some ideas and seek your support.

Addressing these problems requires creativity and a diverse toolkit of options. In recent years, BPL has worked to increase private support for the Library. In January, we

opened the Shelby White and Leon Levy Information Commons at our Central Library on Grand Army Plaza. This innovative collaborative learning space was funded by a generous grant from the Leon Levy Foundation and is already among the most heavily used spaces in our system.

Private fundraising has its limitations, however. Raising private funds to pay for basic infrastructure needs, especially in City-owned branches, is extremely challenging. For the vast majority of our library branches, BPL will need to continue to rely on funding from the Mayor's office and elected officials. At the moment, we are managing many capital projects, including upgrading critical infrastructure at our Clinton Hill branch and completely renovating our Rugby branch. We are looking forward to working with the new Mayor and new Brooklyn Borough President to increase the City's capital allocation to BPL. At other libraries, BPL is working with not-for-profits to offer new services and improve our buildings. We are currently collaborating with Spaceworks, a nonprofit organization dedicated to expanding the amount of affordable studio space for New York City artists. Spaceworks will help renovate and create artist work spaces in our Red Hook and Williamsburgh branches, and provide free arts education programming to patrons.

BPL is also pursuing a unique opportunity in Brooklyn Heights that will eliminate millions of dollars in unmet capital needs and raise funds for branches across Brooklyn while developing an inspiring, relevant, and state-of-the-art library facility. Built in 1962, Brooklyn Heights Library faces more than \$9.2 million in capital needs, including an estimated \$3.5-4.5 million to replace a non-functioning HVAC system. The building is

poorly designed by everyone's standards, has an inefficient floor plan that hinders public service, and more than 50% of its space is not and never was available for public use.

Our plan is to sell the Brooklyn Heights Library and use part of the proceeds from the sale to develop a majestic new library on site. Over the past several months, BPL has worked with a Community Advisory Committee composed of local elected officials and representatives from five community organizations and tenant groups to create a redevelopment process that will include the community's needs, build the best branch possible and generate additional capital dollars that can be reinvested in libraries throughout the borough. By convening the Community Advisory Committee, BPL has sought the community's participation in every phase of the project and we plan to continue to do so. In collaboration with the New York City Economic Development Corporation, in June we released a request for proposals (RFP) that will help us select a development partner for Brooklyn Heights.

Our RFP requires the selected developer to build and deliver to the City, at no cost to BPL, the core and shell of a new, 20,000-square-foot library (one of the five largest libraries in Brooklyn). No more than 5,000 square feet of the new library may be below grade and the library must have a separate and distinct entrance from the rest of the building. The library will be conveyed to the City of New York as a condominium unit for no more than \$1. Our new Brooklyn Heights branch will be a City-owned public building operated by BPL, as is the existing branch. BPL has committed to providing interim library service throughout the redevelopment process. We also will be launching a public process to design the new branch.

Additionally, the RFP contains a number of safeguards to protect BPL and the public's interest. BPL will include a "right of reacquisition" in the contract of sale. This provision will allow the City to reacquire title to the property if a developer fails to deliver the core and shell of the new library to BPL by a specified date. The City will never lose control of the site and if a development partner defaults or otherwise fails to meet the terms of the contract the City will reacquire the site and rebuild the library in its current location. Several other terms will protect BPL through this process. The selected developer will be required to close on the acquisition of the property simultaneously with closing on construction financing. BPL will continue operating the library in the existing building up until construction commences. The developer will be required to post a financial security sufficient to fund the construction of the core and shell as a prerequisite for closing.

As part of this process, BPL has negotiated an agreement with the City that will allow us to realize the proceeds generated by selling City-owned property. BPL will use these proceeds to fit out the new library and will reinvest the remaining proceeds in other libraries throughout the borough. By pursuing this strategy, BPL can deliver a large, new library in Brooklyn Heights while generating significant and much-needed capital dollars for library branches boroughwide. We were thrilled to receive a strong set of responses to the RFP and look forward to briefing local community stakeholders and elected officials in the coming weeks.

Among our branch libraries, the most pressing and expensive of our capital needs are at Pacific Library. Pacific is over 110 years old and has nearly \$10 million in capital needs. Moreover, it is poorly laid out and inaccessible to people with disabilities or

anyone with limited mobility. Initially, we planned to fund the fit out of a new space at BAM South with the proceeds from the sale of Pacific Library. However, elected officials and community stakeholders have made it clear that the community greatly values the architecture of the Pacific building and has concerns about library service moving from that location. We take seriously our responsibility to steward the architectural legacy of the Pacific branch as well as the 17 other Carnegie libraries in Brooklyn. We are committed to working with elected officials and community stakeholders to develop an appropriate plan for the Pacific building through an open community process. The plan will take into account the needs of the Library as well as those of the community. This plan could include maintaining some or all of the Pacific building and continuing to provide library service there. At the same time, we recognize the need to engage in further conversations with stakeholders and to continue to explore other options.

As we work to solve our issues at Pacific, we also have a unique opportunity at BAM South – a chance to avail ourselves of free space located in a vibrant cultural district atop the borough’s busiest transit hub. We are currently in discussion with our cultural partners, BAM and 651 Arts, to develop a plan for the fit out and use of this facility.

There is no single answer that will solve our capital problems. From leveraging private spaces to working with community partners, we must pursue a myriad of creative strategies. With a total of more than \$300 million in deferred maintenance in over one million square feet of space, we need a sustainable path for the future, one that enables us to provide and maintain safe, attractive and functional library spaces in all of our

neighborhoods. I will stress in closing that we have no intention of “disposing” our libraries, or closing our libraries, or shrinking our libraries. We look forward to continuing to collaborate with elected officials and community members to ensure that all Brooklynites have access to the best possible library facilities for generations to come.