

Memorandum

To: Chair Kafoury and Multnomah County Library District Board Commissioners

From: Emily Karr, Chair, and Ruth Shelly, Member
Multnomah County Library Long-Range Space Planning Blue Ribbon Committee

Re: Blue Ribbon Committee Findings

Introduction and Background

Multnomah County Library serves a community of more than 800,000 people through its 19 locations and robust outreach programs. The library is one of the busiest in the nation, and only 102nd in size. Central Library—plus all other branches and including office and warehouse space—would physically fit inside Seattle’s downtown Central Library building, with room to spare.

Multnomah County’s population has grown by nearly 30 percent since the public last voted to expand library facilities in 1996. In addition, the population in Multnomah County is predicted to increase by another 30 percent from 2018 estimates by 2040. Multnomah County Library’s buildings have not kept pace with this growth and are not positioned to keep pace with future growth. Our library buildings are not designed to keep up with changes in how people access information and expect to use their libraries, and they are not distributed in an equitable manner across the county.

The library has conducted a detailed process to analyze and address these issues, as directed by the Multnomah County Library District Board. The library’s leadership has assembled a series of recommendations to undertake branch expansions and modernization in library facilities, including an automated materials handling system and centralized materials storage and distribution, to serve Multnomah County residents more equitably and efficiently.

As part of its planning and due diligence, the library convened a Blue Ribbon Committee, made up of civic and business leaders from across the county, to independently review the library’s long term capital plans and proposals. Commissioner Stegmann participated in the Committee’s meetings but was not part of shaping this memo.

The Committee met three times between April and September 2019. At each step along the way, members were asked to provide written feedback, which has been collected in addition to their comments recorded at meetings. A complete and unedited record of the Blue Ribbon Committee’s feedback is attached to this memo. This memorandum distills and summarizes the Committee’s findings, as it presents those to the Multnomah County Library District Board for consideration of further action.

Key Takeaways from the Blue Ribbon Committee:

- A library bond measure seeking voter approval in the November 2020 election is viable.
- The measure should request branch expansions and modernization in 11 facilities, and include necessary construction to convert to an automated materials handling system that would increase efficiency and reduce operating costs into the future.
- In terms of the scale and scope of a bond measure, Committee members reviewed the library's public opinion research and expressed optimism that the public will embrace a plan to modernize and expand library spaces to meet community needs. At the same time, some members expressed concern about other public funding measures that may be under consideration on the same ballot. Committee members encouraged County leaders to ensure that any other funding proposals under review for potential voter consideration are designed to be complementary in their approach. This could reduce any potential public concern about multiple priorities.
- Equity of services is top of mind for the Committee and the community: With more than 40% of the county population living east of I-205, but less than a quarter of library space located in this portion of the county, it is time to better and more equitably serve all our residents. The proposals include prioritizing expansion in East Portland and East County libraries, and particularly establishing a 'flagship' library, on par with Central Library, to serve Gresham and East County.
- If the Board refers a measure and voters approve it, the library should convene a volunteer Community Bond Oversight Committee to complement the oversight functions already in place in the county. This type of independent community oversight committee has been used in other jurisdictions and adds valuable checks and balances to the process.
- The library and county should actively seek partnership opportunities with other local jurisdictions and agencies in order to minimize land acquisition costs and maximize the impact of shared services. This could include co-locating new library facilities with affordable housing or community services.

Planning Process

Framework for Future Library Spaces

Over the past three years, the library has conducted a comprehensive community engagement and analysis process to understand space deficiencies and what the community's priorities are for the modernization and expansion of library spaces. An important milestone in that process was the creation of a specific library capital planning framework for the coming 15 years, the Framework for Future Library Spaces.

The framework was created based on the input of diverse communities, through 13 culturally-specific focus groups, 51 community conversations across the county with nearly 2,000 community members at libraries, community centers, service agencies and partner organizations and a public survey that received more than 1,700 responses.

The framework includes a facility-by-facility breakdown of future needs and goals for the spaces. In 2017, the Multnomah County Library District Board directed the library to study models for costs, funding, timelines and staging of projects to achieve the framework's recommendations.

Cost Development and Determination

Informed by this framework, the library, together with consulting architects and cost estimators, utilized a cost estimation process to enable the highest-confidence cost projections possible. This began with the work of Hennebery Eddy Architects and ACC Cost Consultants. These cost projections were subsequently scrutinized by a second independent cost estimator, DCW Cost Management. Next, these numbers were reviewed and discussed by the Multnomah County Library Long-Range Space Planning Blue Ribbon Committee.

Developing a Bond Package Proposal for Voter Approval

In late 2018, the library embarked upon the process to create recommendations for an initial bond proposal to put before the Multnomah County Library District Board for possible referral to voters in the November 2020 election. The process has centered on community input, especially the perspectives of historically marginalized communities.

The BRC reviewed the Framework for Future Library Spaces, public opinion as expressed in a scientifically valid survey, the cost estimation process, cost estimate examples and numbers, proposals for automated materials handling, and two specific bond package proposals for consideration by the Multnomah County Library District Board to refer to the November 2020 ballot.

Considerable Multnomah County expertise informed the BRC process, with participation by Chair Deborah Kafoury, District 4 Commissioner Lori Stegmann, Multnomah County Chief Financial Officer Eric Arellano, Multnomah County Economist Jeff Renfro, as well as assistance with project management costs from Multnomah County Facilities.

Controlling Operating Costs

The Framework for Future Library Spaces outlines a path to significantly increase library space across the county while simultaneously keeping operating cost impacts at a minimum. The key to this approach requires adding efficiencies by converting to an automated materials handling system through a centralized sorting and distribution facility. Currently, every library item is sorted and moved by hand across the system. Most modern libraries in this region have already converted to automated systems, including libraries in Oregon City, Hillsboro, Beaverton and Vancouver.

The library is also engaged in updating staffing models to ensure that library staff are able to flexibly serve the public as user needs change. The library has estimated that modern library designs, updated staffing models and automated materials handling will allow the system to expand library spaces significantly, with an approximate 7% increase to staffing and building costs.

Community Feedback

The library conducted a statistically valid public opinion survey in August to determine whether the public is open to considering a library bond measure that would expand and modernize branches. The result showed that the library is an extremely popular county service, that it has broad and deep institutional credibility, and that a bond measure is supported by at least two-thirds of surveyed voters with very little price sensitivity as to the cost of the package. This information also serves to provide the communities' priorities for the capital bond package.

Members of the Blue Ribbon Committee:

- Amy Wayson, Literary Arts Board of Directors
- Carter MacNichol, Shiels Oblatz Johnsen
- Charles Wilhoite, Willamette Management Associates
- Cole Mills, Bridgetown Wealth Management
- Dan Field, Kaiser Permanente NW
- Dan Lavey, Gallatin Public Affairs
- Dave Robertson and Deane Funk, Portland General Electric
- Emily Karr, Stoel Rives
- Ginnie Cooper, retired Multnomah County Library Director
- Julie Harrelson, Cascade Seed Fund
- Lizzie Martinez, Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon / Library Advisory Board
- Multnomah County Commissioner Lori Stegmann, District 4
- Lisa Riggs, Gresham-Barlow School District
- Luis Vargas, Modern Adventure
- Mark Garber, Pamplin Media Group
- Mary Faulkner, Ferguson Wellman Capital Management
- Michael Liu, Fubonn
- Rachel Solotaroff, Central City Concern
- Randall Edwards, ENSOGO Analytics
- Richelle Luther, Columbia Sportswear
- Ruth Shelly, Portland Children's Museum
- Skip Newberry, Technology Association of Oregon
- Theo Downes-Le Guin, Upfor
- Traci Rossi, Center for Women's Leadership