

BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY

TESTIMONY ON THE EXECUTIVE BUDGET

Jointly to the Finance Committee and the Committee on Cultural Affairs,

Libraries & International Intergroup Relations

May 13, 2022

Good morning. I am Linda Johnson, President & CEO of Brooklyn Public Library. Thank you, Speaker Adams, Chairs Brannan and Ossé, and committee members for the opportunity to testify on the executive budget, and to our Brooklyn delegation and the entire City Council for your efforts to ensure our branches remain safe, welcoming spaces for all.

Today, I ask that you continue your longstanding investment in New York City's Public Libraries, first, by restoring the Council's \$14 million dollar Libraries Initiative. This is a top priority, as this crucial funding was not carried forward in the Fiscal Year 2023 Executive Budget proposal and without it, we will be forced to rollback service. Additionally, we need the Council's support for our collective request to the administration for \$15.7 million in new expense funds.

Likewise, our three systems' capital needs are extensive, and together we submitted capital budget requests to the administration totaling \$163 million for fiscal year 2023. While we were heartened to receive new capital funding in the Executive Budget, we have outstanding needs that the Council can be helpful in addressing.

We appreciate the Speaker, Finance committee and entire Council for backing increased funding for libraries in your preliminary budget response, and we urge the City's continued support, so we can serve the public at the level they have come to expect and deserve.

Expense

Prior to the pandemic, Brooklyn Public Library welcomed over 9 million visits in a single year, with more than 15 million books checked out and over 1 million program attendees. Though the pandemic forced us to shut our doors for the first time in our 125-year history, we adapted our programs to digital platforms with tremendous success. From Storytimes in over a dozen languages to live personalized homework help, teen internships, adult learning classes and career coaching—patrons of all ages relied on us in multiple ways.

And for the staggering 29% of Brooklynites who lack digital access, we helped bridge the divide. Brooklyn Public Library boosted our free Wi-Fi signal 300 feet in every direction beyond our branch walls and helped patrons in neighborhoods with the lowest rates of broadband access to sign up for the federal Affordable Connectivity Program. We also loaned hotspots to Adult Learning students, offered bedtime stories by phone, hosted Learning Labs in six branches for children to school remotely and regularly called to check in on dozens of homebound patrons.

Our librarians performed incredible work despite the obstacles. Just last week, Nicole Bryan, manager of Macon Library in Bedford-Stuyvesant, in Chairman Ossé's district, was honored with a national "Mover and Shaker" award from Library Journal. Nicole started her position at the branch just 2 months before the pandemic hit and was among the first to experiment with outdoor library service. In the summer of 2020, she arranged to close off the street in front of her branch setting up book carts, community events and lively outdoor programming. Nicole has recently been honored as a local health hero, as well, recognizing her leadership in helping the city reopen during the pandemic.

We have always been strong partners for the city, serving as polling places and cooling centers, establishing IDNYC registration centers and welcoming new Americans. Libraries stepped up again as COVID hit, hosting information and mask distribution, testing, and vaccination sites for children. As our city struggles through new COVID variants we continue to partner with the Test and Trace Corps. Right now, anyone can pick up a free at-home COVID test kit at any of our branches, Brooklyn Public Library has already distributed more than 56,000 test kits throughout the borough.

We are more than 2 years into this pandemic, and our dedicated staff is working to meet the demand for increased library service. While we have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels across the board, data trends show that we are well on our way. Books, of course, are still a top request, with more than 825,000 items circulated throughout our system in March, the highest monthly circulation we have had since February 2020.

Of course, there is more to meeting increased demand than simply enhancing our physical and digital collections. We face a particular challenge now, balancing services both in-person and virtually, which further strains our resources. Brooklyn Public Library strives to offer the innovative and cutting-edge programming that we are known for, and now we must provide it in all the ways the public has come to expect. I described this challenge at the Council's recent hearing on BIPOC youth learning loss. About 90,000 teen patrons attended our virtual programs during the pandemic, and while the number of those coming back to the library in person has increased significantly, many are continuing to participate online. Expanding hybrid teen programming, enhancing our physical spaces and increasing teen tech centers in our branches is a top priority, but it requires increased funding.

Like other agencies, Brooklyn Public Library was asked to absorb a PEG in the current fiscal year. We have been able to endure the cut by maintaining existing vacancies. However, running the system without full staffing is pushing us to the limit of our capacity to operate. That is why restoration of the Council's Libraries Initiative is so important. The allocation of \$14 million across the three systems, \$3.9 million of which is for Brooklyn Public Library, allows us to continue providing services. Without it, we risk having to cut our already insufficient branch repair budget, cut our collections budget, and eliminate positions.

But restoring \$14 million dollars alone will not solve the problem. As the city continues to emerge from the pandemic, our libraries must be functionally capable of providing robust service. Earlier this year the three library systems outlined our new needs for the Administration, requesting \$15.7 million dollars in new expense funding for Fiscal Year 2023. This includes \$5 million dollars for Brooklyn Public Library to enhance our physical and digital collections to meet growing demand; to allow us to perform building repairs that are either emergencies or not capially eligible; and to replace our antiquated

Information Technology systems that are almost 30 years old. These are not luxuries; your support for this request is necessary for us to continue serving all New Yorkers.

Capital

Beyond staffing, collections and programs, libraries must be safe and inspiring spaces for everyone who comes through our doors. Brooklyn Public Library is the steward of 62 locations; more than 1 million square feet of city-owned buildings plagued by failing HVAC systems, leaking roofs and broken boilers. Last fiscal year, we lost an astonishing twelve hundred hours of public service due to unplanned closures throughout the system, with disruptions at 51 of our branches.

With \$250 million in deferred maintenance and no recurring unallocated capital funds to depend on, we must prioritize emergencies instead of focusing on preventative maintenance, and choose which projects make limited progress while others stall until the next budget cycle. To address emergency repairs that simply cannot wait for the initiation of a new capital project, the library is forced to dip into our precious operating funds.

Approaching our infrastructure needs responsibly in our submission to the Administration, Brooklyn Public Library detailed \$130.1 million dollars' worth of capital needs over the next 4 years. We were pleased that \$20 million was allocated for Brooklyn Public Library in the 4-year capital plan. While this welcome allocation shows an understanding of our serious infrastructure challenges, we unfortunately still face \$110 million in unfunded needs.

City Council capital funding has kept our library upgrades and renovation projects alive and moving forward. Ranging from \$5 to \$10 million a year over the last decade coupled with individual member allocations, council capital funding has been a lifeline—allowing us to repair and renovate branches that otherwise might have continued to deteriorate. For fiscal year 2023, we are requesting \$10 million in systemwide capital funding from the Council to help us meet our unmet project needs throughout the borough.

We have shown that with adequate funding, we can deliver exceptional spaces. From the Adams Street Library, our first new location since 1983, to the upcoming openings of Brower Park Library at the Brooklyn Children's Museum, the new Brooklyn Heights Library in just a few weeks and the renovated East Flatbush Library, we will have many new libraries welcoming patrons back inside. With your help, over the next few years we will have been able to renovate a third of our branches.

Every great city deserves inspirational libraries. I ask that as you determine the priorities for our great city in the upcoming year, you continue to invest in our society's most accessible, democratic institutions—our public libraries. We can help the city recover equitably if you help us remain strong for all who come through our doors and ensure that those doors remain open wide for everyone. Thank you.