



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

Senator O'Mara's weekly column 'From the Capitol' ~ for the week of April 5, 2021 ~ "Recognize libraries in this post-COVID budget"

THOMAS F. O'MARA April 5, 2021

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Libraries and their staffs and volunteers have been remarkable lifelines helping to keep our communities together, strong, and moving forward.

Senator O'Mara offers his weekly perspective on many of the key challenges and issues facing the Legislature, as well as on legislative actions, local initiatives, state programs and policies, and more. Stop back every Monday for Senator O'Mara's latest column...

This week, "Recognize libraries in this post-COVID budget"

National Library Week, April 4-10, is sponsored annually by the American Library Association to help recognize "the contributions of our nation's libraries and librarians and to promote library use and support."

This year's observance could not be more timely or important. It will include, on April 6, National Library Workers Day to recognize and celebrate America's more than 300,000 librarians and library technicians, assistants and other staff members and volunteers for their contributions, which have been nothing short of remarkable throughout this past year. On April 7, the first-ever National Library Outreach Day will honor the role that libraries play in bringing library services to underserved communities and regions.

Here at home, I will take this opportunity to express our collective gratitude to the men and women of the Southern Tier Library System (www.stls.org) and the Finger Lakes Library System (www.flls.org).

A public library is a fundamental resource for area families, seniors, and countless other community residents. That point has been driven home like never before over the past year when throughout the COVID-19 response our public libraries have been centers of public outreach and information. Libraries and their staffs and volunteers have been remarkable lifelines helping to keep our communities together, strong, and moving forward. We simply cannot thank them enough.

Of course, it demands more than thanks from state government.

Consequently, it was alarming that Governor Andrew Cuomo, in his proposed 2021-2022 state budget, essentially turned the administration's back on the importance of libraries. According to testimony from the New York Library Association, the governor's proposed budget "aggressively attacks local libraries and library services" by cutting the Library Aid Program by 7.5% and allocating just \$14 million for the all-important Library Construction Grant Program.

These proposed cuts represent significantly diminished state support since 2018-2019, when I can tell you that my colleagues and I in the Senate Republican Conference helped lead the legislative effort that budget cycle to boost state library aid to nearly \$97 million, the first increase since 2016, and brought the investment in capital and construction aid to a badly needed \$34 million.

The adoption of the new 2021-2022 state budget, as of this writing, is late and remains uncertain. It's indicative, in my view, of the impact that the investigations, reported abuses of power, scandals, and cover-ups swirling around Governor Cuomo and his inner circle are having on the functioning of state government.

Nevertheless, we have made it known that, as always, library aid must remain a fundamental priority and it is imperative for the current leaders of the Legislature to continue to invest in these lifelines for our communities.

For example, according to the state Division of Library Development, it's estimated that the cost of public library construction and renovation needs statewide totals more than \$1.5 billion. More than 51% of the over 1,000 public library buildings across New York are over 60 years old. Another 31% are more than three decades old. Many of the state's local public libraries are unable to accommodate users with disabilities, and cannot provide Internet, computer, and other electronic technologies to users because of outdated and inadequate electrical wiring. They also do not have sufficient space to house the library's collection and lack sufficient space for public access computers.

In 2015, I was proud to join my local legislative colleagues, Assemblymen Phil Palmesano and Chris Friend, to sponsor a new law (Chapter 480 of the Laws of 2015) that, for the first time, included "installation and infrastructure of broadband services" as a specific project category eligible to receive funding through the Library Construction Grant Program. Prior to the law's enactment, libraries were unable to access funding through the popular grant program specifically for broadband purposes including cable, wiring and modems, and network terminals and access points.

Overall, we are always hopeful that these grants will help local libraries better afford and address their renovation needs. Public libraries, especially in many rural, upstate communities and regions, are New York's leading digital literacy educators, just one of many vital community roles our libraries fulfill. This role will expand in future years.

Throughout this National Library Week, as we continue to move forward into our post-COVID future, there will be opportunities to reflect on what libraries have meant to our communities and our families throughout the past year.

It will also be a week during which, I hope, the new state budget comes into focus -- a budget that must, I will stress again, fundamentally recognize the importance of renewed investment that will help more and more public libraries continue to meet increasing demands.

It represents an investment in education, economic growth, and the quality and strength of communities.

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