

Multnomah County Library District 2023-24 Hearing Minutes

Wednesday, May 31, 2023

10:30 a.m.

Multnomah Building 501 SE Hawthorne Blvd.
Portland, Oregon

Present: TSCC:

Chair Harmony Quiroz, Commissioner Margo Norton, Commissioner James Ofsink, Commissioner Mark Wubbold, Commissioner Matt Donahue, Executive Director Allegra Willhite, and Budget Analyst Tunie Betschart

Absent: None

Multnomah County:

Multnomah County Board of Commissioners: Chair Jessica Vega Pederson, Commissioner Sharon Meieran, Commissioner Diane Rosenbaum, Commissioner Susheela Jayapal, and Commissioner Lori Stegmann

Staff: Deputy Director Annie Lewis and Director of Finance & Facilities Katie Shifley

Chair Quiroz welcomed everyone to the hearing and briefly described the duties and responsibilities of the TSCC. She reviewed the hearing process and stated the hearing was to engage the district leadership and provide an opportunity for the public to comment before Multnomah County Library District adopts its budget. She asked the TSCC Commissioners and staff to introduce themselves and state if they have business relationships with Multnomah County Library District that could be perceived as a conflict of interest. Each commissioner and staff member introduced themselves and said they had no conflict of interest with the county. She asked Multnomah County District representatives present to introduce themselves.

She asked Katie Shifley if she had any comments on the Library District's Approved Budget before questions begin. Ms. Shifley said they valued the partnership with TSCC and recommended moving to public comment and the questions.

Chair Quiroz asked if anyone had signed up to give public comment. Executive Director Willhite reported that no citizens signed up to speak at this hearing, and no written comments were received, so Chair Quiroz began the TSCC questions.

TSCC questions:

Commissioner Ofsink asked the following questions:

The county levies for library bonds that fund capital projects. These projects will result in significant changes to the Library's current infrastructure. From new buildings to refreshing existing ones, nearly all aspects of the library's physical spaces will be evolving. How will library programming change as a result of the new spaces, and what staff impacts do you expect to see?

Ms. Annie Lewis said the library bond projects will reinvent how the community can use library spaces. Libraries will still have the collections and resources people know and love, but the experience of being in a library will be centered around people. The thoughtful expansion of library spaces will introduce new, more flexible spaces for programming and services responsive to community needs.

For decades, the constraints of the physical footprint have impacted where they could offer library programming and services. Now there is an opportunity to recenter the library as the place for library services. In addition to supporting popular library programs, the district will now be able to offer expanded creative opportunities through the major investment in technology being made in these buildings— including audio studios for music and podcasting, innovative learning spaces that can support a variety of programs, maker spaces for STEAM learning, improved audio/video and internet support, and even an auditorium at the East County Library, which will center the library as a space for civic engagement, community entertainment and many other programming opportunities.

Adding more flexible space and cutting-edge technologies to library buildings and operations means the district will need to train and reorient current staff and add new staff to realize the full potential of these new spaces. Staffing will need the ability to support new technologies and additional community programming. The FY 24 budget also includes a Community Partnerships Manager position to develop new, location-specific partnerships so that community groups can begin to co-create programming in new library spaces.

Commissioner Wubbold asked these follow-up questions:

Are these ongoing commitments? Is the plan to teach people the technical aspect of this, and how to maintain it? Do you have dollars to do this?

Ms. Lewis said they have received funding from the Library Foundation to support acquiring some equipment, particularly the Maker Spaces and Flexible Learner Spaces. The district will evaluate the use of the equipment and how the community responds.

Ms. Katie Shifley added that this is all new to them, and they want to ensure the program funding going forward. They have set aside resources in the future to replace the initial equipment on a regular cycle. At that point, they will be able to make an educated evaluation of the use of this program and decide whether or not to move forward with the program. If the decision is to move forward, the expenditures will be worked into the district's operations.

Commissioner Donahue asked the following questions:

Let's talk about library closures happening while bond projects are underway. Currently six libraries are closed to the public. What work are you doing to mitigate impacts to the community which appears to be caught by surprise about the breadth and duration of these closures? What is in place currently, and what do you have planned for the duration of the projects?

Ms. Lewis said after voters approved the library bond in November 2020, the library and Multnomah County leadership agreed on fiscally responsible and aggressive bond spending deadlines to maximize taxpayer investment and mitigate the dramatic effects of inflation and supply chain disruptions. The construction schedule has disrupted some services, as multiple library building

closures happen simultaneously.

To reduce the impact of these closures, the library has proactively communicated with patrons about the closures and promoted alternative locations and services. Using an equity framework, the library has expanded staff support at open locations and opened temporary services to communities most impacted by the closures.

For instance, the library's Community Tech Space is down the block from the Central Library in downtown Portland. This space offers technology access and help, including free internet and computer use, device charging, printing, faxing, and scanning. The Mobile Library, located at a Multnomah County property at 122nd and Glisan, provides technology support, access to culturally and linguistically relevant materials, and more.

Staff at closed locations have been reassigned to outreach teams in each geographic region where libraries are closed - Northeast, Downtown, and Mid-County. These outreach teams provide drop-in library and tech-help services at community organizations such as the Chinese Language School and the Rosewood Initiative.

The brief closure of several libraries simultaneously is a complex tradeoff. Still, the new library spaces on their way will allow for a significant advancement in this community's ability to bring together people, information, opportunities, and resources.

Commissioner Norton asked these follow-up questions:

You mentioned the Mobile Library. What is the usage of this library?

Ms. Lewis said they have had a slow rollout of the Mobile Library. People are using it, but the district has not broadly marketed the Mobile Library. Staff is learning about the needs of using the Mobile Library, such as meeting schedules. The district will do more marketing once the staff feels more comfortable using this resource. So, currently, the usage is low.

What type of marketing are you planning to do?

Ms. Lewis said they have a marketing and communications team and a skilled social media marketer focusing on engagement through social media. The district also has outreach teams of staff who have been reassigned to those teams and are going out and connecting with the community through the public schools and other agencies to market the Mobile Library through word of mouth.

Chair Quiroz asked the following questions:

We know you have prioritized community engagement throughout the bond projects. Are you getting the level of response you hoped for from the community? What engagement techniques have been particularly effective? What techniques are not working?

Ms. Lewis said the Library Capital Bond Program's Community Engagement Ethos guides each of the nine major projects. With the spirit of the community being in the room for key design decision points, the design teams use a variety of community engagement channels to amplify

the voices of those most often underrepresented by government, education, and other organizations.

Community engagement channels currently include:

- Public community meetings: virtual and in-person
- Tabling and outreach at community events
- Paid community engagement programs
- Focus groups
- 1:1 Interviews
- Asynchronous opportunities
- Public surveys

Engagement for the Chapter One projects (Holgate, Midland, Albina, and North Portland) met and exceeded the library's commitment to community engagement. While online meetings were sparsely attended and not a productive technique to deeply engage community members, turnout for public events at libraries, farmers markets, and community celebrations proved an excellent way to grow awareness of the project and ask specific questions for direction and preference. Team members are in the community at the 21st Annual Autism Walk, Hacienda CDC food pantry, Dishman Community Center, and dozens of other community gathering points. The library provides public voting on various topics for each major project.

She highlighted the following three techniques projects:

- First, the paid community engagement programs across all four projects brought grassroots community organizers of all ages close to the design process. From Community Design Advocates holding focus groups within their communities to teens participating in the Youth Opportunity Design Approach, offering paid opportunities to the community provides respect, dignity, and a value of time to folks often left out due to transportation, childcare, and other barriers to participation. Some of the most profound insights and solutions came from these community members, and they are by far the most popular speakers at each of the projects' groundbreaking ceremonies. Compensated community design team members are surveyed annually on their satisfaction with the program.
- Another stand-out impact of community engagement is the lasting impression community members make in the buildings through art. Community art workshops hosted by both Regional Art & Culture Council (RACC) artists and architects invited the public to share their culture and creativity to inspire the artwork that each building will include. These workshops provide a hands-on contribution while offering the community the experience of being part of a collaborative art installation. Community art is a vital aspect of many library projects and, for participants, a tangible touchpoint and imprint of themselves as part of the final buildings.
- One broad engagement technique that brought out thousands of community members' opinions was the public voting offered on Chapter 1 projects. Voting on themes and colorways for interiors and exteriors has become extraordinarily popular and relatively easy to manage. This process gives community members both insight into the design process and a chance to offer their opinion on the look and feel of library buildings. The team will continue to look for additional public voting opportunities on the remaining projects.

The East County Library project is deep into community engagement. While the project team is utilizing those established techniques mentioned earlier, they are also experimenting with additional outreach through media ads and expansive outreach work with established community

organizations in East County through a paid Library Champions program. Engagement planning for the final projects (Northwest, St. John's, and Belmont) is underway.

Many themes have emerged across the communities that speak to a common desire for connection. People have shared that they want a place to cook food and share cultural recipes, a place to make art and music, a place to gather with others and learn from each other, and a place to be with nature. In all of these, the community is asking for space to connect with others and themselves, resulting directly in amenities offered in the buildings, including outdoor courtyards, reading gardens, gathering circles, and flexible civic plazas.

Commissioner Wubbold asked the following questions:

Some library patrons may have misgivings about the planned changes to libraries, such as the reduction in the number of printed materials, both new and in special collections. What is your response to those who may question the current direction the Library is taking?

Ms. Lewis said even before the pandemic completely altered how everyone lived and accessed resources, the library was changing to meet modern needs. The district has continued to invest in both print and digital collections and tailor services to meet accelerated needs for resources in multiple languages, new technologies, and diverse programming. The circulation of digital materials has been increasing at an incredible rate. Digital checkouts now represent 61 percent of Multnomah County Library's overall circulation! Over the past ten years, digital checkouts have increased more than 900%.

The good news is that with these spaces, they are not reducing the overall size of printed materials collection that is available for circulation. This is a common misunderstanding. Libraries will continue to provide books and other physical materials, and the number is not decreasing.

The creation of a new centralized operations center means the library can store and circulate thousands of materials directly from that one building rather than manually packing and processing items by hand from branch to branch to be picked up by a patron eventually. For decades, the library has used its largest location — Central Library — as expensive storage space to accommodate items that cannot fit in other branches.

With the centralization of some collections across the library system at the operations center, including from Central Library, the district is making space for tailored, culturally relevant collections informed by the neighborhoods of those libraries. The library will use circulation data and other measures to ensure that the vast majority of materials moved from Central Library to the Operations Center haven't been checked out in more than two years. Perhaps most importantly, the shifts in how we distribute the library's collection allow for valuable community space that can be used for conversing, learning, creating, and simply being. The libraries are for everyone, and these new spaces demonstrate that value.

The Title Wave service is shut down. Is there plans to offer a similar program? Will the library accept book donations as they have in the past?

Ms. Lewis said there are plans to have a service similar to Title Wave at the Operations Center at 122nd and Glisan. She said she does not know if they will eventually be able to accept donations. She will follow up with the answer later.

Commissioner Norton asked the following questions:

At last year's TSCC hearing we discussed the sizable fund balance for the library district, money that you shared is being held in reserve to address future structural operating deficit issues. But what about expenses and increased staffing? What work does the library do to explore efficiencies to contain costs? What are examples of cost efficiency measures the library has taken in recent years?

Ms. Shifley said like any other industry, public library service is evolving and responding to community needs and the changing world. With the construction of new spaces, the district is taking the opportunity to examine current staffing models to assess what staffing looks like in different buildings rather than replicate our existing model. Even before the library bond projects, library leadership practices reviewing vacancies as they arise to ensure that skill sets and roles are best aligned with organizational priorities.

The library has maintained good stewardship of taxpayer dollars through several efforts, such as ensuring excellent ongoing maintenance of its infrastructure and materials. Library buildings have been kept updated, and the district will continue to support appropriate annual maintenance and condition assessments to ensure the longevity of these significant infrastructure investments.

As discussed earlier, the library is centralizing some of its services by opening the new Operations Center. It will also create efficiencies in material movement, storage costs, and other administrative processes and allow for easier access to mid and East County, where the district provides many services. The historical lack of physical space in libraries created, out of necessity, additional outreach costs to ensure those services that could not take place inside library buildings could still happen via external spaces and partnerships. Now, the district can bring some library and community services inside the library— a benefit to patrons and a responsible use of library resources.

She concluded by stating that the Library District has always been, and will continue to be, very judicious about where and when they add ongoing costs. The conversation to maintain a balance between the revenue and expenses happens each year. In the past, when these lines come close to crossing, the district has implemented constraint budgets, and if the lines come close, the district will once again implement a constraint budget.

Where are those lines at the current time and in the forecasting?

Ms. Shifley said the current ten-year forecast shows the district can maintain the current service levels at the same \$1.2200 tax rate over ten years. However, the ten-year forecast assumes business as it is currently. There will be some changes with the new buildings and other changes. The district is working closely with economist Jeff Renfro and partners at DCA to attempt to forecast future costs when the district has more buildings and other various changes.

What is the district looking at as far as staffing changes to meet the new demands for different services offered.? And how does that look in the forecasting model?

Ms. Shifley said this is currently underway. They have had several workshops to determine the total number of staff and what job classifications and skillsets are needed for future positions. She said

staffing is still unclear, but they are considering how to train current staff to serve future needs.

Commissioner Ofsink asked the following questions:

Last year we spoke about how libraries are changing post-pandemic, and the board mentioned an opportunity for the Library to partner with Multnomah County Health Department's Behavioral Health Unit to ensure more seamless connection to social services for library patrons in need. Can you tell us more about this? Is this work that is happening currently, or perhaps in the works for the future? If it is now underway, how is this going?

Ms. Lewis said the district has had conversations with Behavioral Health Services to figure out how and where they can bring their services to people in the library. These conversations are still in progress, as the current cramped spaces make it difficult to accommodate these resources in a substantive way. The new, more flexible spaces will present better partnership opportunities. Many people served via the Health Department, mainly through Behavior Health, are also patrons seen in the libraries. The district will continue to explore how they can connect and support more behavioral health expertise in library spaces, and thus far, health colleagues have been receptive to working together.

The library has an ongoing contract with Cascadia Behavioral Health and has seen great success in having community resource counselors at Central Library and guidance for other library branches. District staff has talked with other library systems about using peer support navigators and are beginning to research what that might look like in the system.

The district continues to provide appropriate training for library staff to help patrons who may need additional support using the library or locating appropriate services. However, library staff are limited in what they can provide regarding mental health services, and they know it is critically important to continue to advance partnerships with agencies and departments with this expertise and resources.

Commissioner Donahue asked the following questions:

What do you see as the biggest challenges and opportunities on the horizon for libraries?

Ms. Lewis answered, saying the public library is changing and evolving. While that has been happening for a while, new library spaces will transform how this institution is used, primarily serving people in the same way for more than 150 years. It is tremendously exciting. However, it will be challenging for some to experience a new way of using and understanding the library.

Another challenge is identifying how the library can adequately meet social safety and service needs. As was discussed earlier, establishing and maintaining partnerships with medical and mental health professionals will be critical to the sustainability of providing those kinds of support.

We also know that this transformation is essential not just for the Multnomah County community but also as a signal to communities around the country challenging the value and role of libraries. It is painful to watch as other library systems - including here in Oregon - face escalated threats of censorship, defunding, and book banning—a fight that has turned beloved community

institutions into bargaining chips of social and political discourse.

The district is fortunate and grateful to Multnomah County for supporting its libraries. It will continue to honor the trust and investment of residents and patrons by providing library resources and services that meet the community's needs.

Chair Quiroz asked the following questions:

We see there is \$1.4 million in the fiscal year 2024 Approved budget dedicated for special projects that will be placed in a special subfund at the county specifically for navigating temporary space, technology, and other needs arising from the capital bond program. Is the bond unable to pay these costs, were these new or unanticipated costs, and will this be needed for the next several years to meet costs outside the bond?

Ms. Shifley said the district has a handful of projects next fiscal year included in a new program offer. These projects are part of the library's operational needs resulting from the bond work. An example is the Continuity of Library Services project, which is about mitigating community service-level impacts during temporary bond closures.

The Library District is setting up community technology spaces and having a semi-permanent location for the Mobile Library. There are hard costs associated with this operational work that were not envisioned as part of the voter-approved bond; the library bond team is focused on ensuring that bond resources are dedicated to modernizing the new library spaces through construction and technology investments.

Another example of a project in the Library Special Projects program offers is a pilot for staff technology - from communications equipment to mobile computing solutions. District funds are being used for this work because it is staff-facing, and bond projects focus on community-facing library system improvements.

These are not new or unanticipated costs - the library has been planning for this work for over a year and a half, and funding for these projects was included in the Library District FY 23 Adopted budget. The most significant change here is that we are budgeting for the temporary services, spaces, and technology as part of the County library budget, as a stand-alone program offer, to help with overall transparency and communication around this work.

Chair Quiroz thanked Annie Lewis and Katie Shifley for their responses to the questions and contributions to the hearing. Then, she closed the hearing and opened a regular meeting of the Tax Supervising and Conservation Commission to certify the County Library's 2023-24 Approved budget. She asked if the TSCC commissioners had any questions or comments to make concerning the budget. There were none.

Chair Quiroz asked Executive Director Allegra Willhite to give staff recommendations for the certification letter.

Ms. Willhite said she would like to take a moment to welcome Katie Shifley as part of the Library Staff. With this being her first year, she has done a great job. She said all library staff take a thoughtful approach to their work, which shows in their budget and the budget process. For the fiscal year 2023-24 Approved

budget, TSCC staff found the budget estimates reasonable for the purposes stated and the budget to comply with Local Budget Law.

Chair Quiroz called for a motion.

Commissioner Wubbold moved to certify Multnomah County's Approved Budget with no recommendations or objections as recommended by staff. Commissioner Donahue seconded the motion, which passed with a unanimous vote of the commissioners.

There being no other business, Chair Quiroz closed the meeting.