

Multnomah County Library

2025-26 Hearing Minutes

Wednesday, June 4, 2025

10:30 a.m.

Multnomah Building 501 SE Hawthorne Blvd.
Portland, Oregon

Present:

TSCC:

Chair Harmony Quiroz,
Vice Chair Matt Donahue,
Commissioner Tod Burton,
Commissioner Allison Lugo Knapp,
Commissioner Dr. Rita Moore,
Allegra Willhite, Executive Director
Brittanie Abayare, Budget Analyst

Absent: None

Multnomah County Board of Commissioners:

Annie Lewis, Director of Libraries,
Katie Shifley, Finance and Facilities Director,
Dave Ratliff, Interim Deputy Director

Opening Remarks and Introductions

The Multnomah County Library budget hearing was officially called to order by Chair Harmony Quiroz, Chair of the Tax Supervising and Conservation Commission (TSCC). Chair Quiroz provided a brief reminder of the TSCC's role as a community oversight commission, established over 100 years ago by the Oregon legislature, to oversee budgets of member taxing districts, conduct thorough reviews, and hold public hearings to engage district leadership and allow public comment. Commissioners, staff and library representatives made introductions. She then turned the floor over to Director of Libraries, Annie Lewis for opening remarks. Director Lewis confirmed that the Library did not have any prepared opening remarks but expressed gratitude for the commission's service and thoughtful questions.

Public Comment

No members of the public had signed up for testimony.

Commissioner Questions and District Responses

Chair Quiroz asked: Director Lewis, this is your first year as Director of Libraries - tell us, what have been some of your biggest successes so far – what are you most proud of?

Director Lewis stated she was most proud of successfully leading the library through a period of monumental transformation and change while remaining true to their mission and values. This involved navigating simultaneous changes, including the implementation of a new staffing plan, a significant part of the FY26 budget submission, and leadership transition, with Dave Ratliff serving as interim deputy director. She also noted responding to shifts in federal administration priorities affecting libraries, which required steady leadership and clear communication. She highlighted the opening of three new libraries (Holgate, Midland, North Portland) starting in July 2024, with significant work underway for the upcoming Albina opening. She expressed pride in the library's work to achieve these milestones, support staff, and maintain a standard of excellence for serving patrons.

Commissioner Donahue asked: We have noticed and appreciated the outreach to the community on library design. Based on your experiences so far, what community engagement strategies have been most effective in shaping the design of the new and renovated library spaces?

Director Lewis explained that community engagement is at the heart of the library's capital bond program. Several key approaches were particularly impactful:

- An "all hands-on deck" approach, where architects, designers, construction managers, bond staff, and library staff all directly participated in community conversations, providing invaluable diverse relationships and perspectives.
- Offering paid community engagement opportunities, especially for youth, which ensured diverse representation and led participants to become ambassadors for the work.
- Utilizing a variety of communication channels, from broad surveys to smaller focus groups and event tabling, which significantly widened their reach.
- Investing in translation and interpreting services in Spanish, Russian, Vietnamese, and Chinese, which was essential for greater access, particularly for individuals with limited English proficiency.

Follow-up question asked by Commissioner Donahue: What have been the most significant learnings from the community comments on design, and how might that feedback influence future district projects?

Director Lewis stated that the library gained valuable insights into the community's priorities for accessible and inclusive spaces, flexible and adaptable layouts, and welcoming environments that reflect the diverse needs of users. Patrons appreciated expanded spaces, especially more meeting and study areas, and vibrant colors and artwork. New features for children and design choices focusing on accessibility were also well-received.

However, they did hear some dissatisfaction from patrons regarding collection size, as lowered shelving for improved sightlines resulted in a perception of a less robust collection. Director Lewis noted that new locations feature flexibility for display space to highlight materials and increase browsability. She shared patron quotes, including positive feedback like "The artwork and colors throughout the library are so intentional and shows that the community was important in the design process. I love the meeting spaces and the thoughtfulness towards the staff," and "I love the Midland Library, our taxes put to such wonderful use." One quote reflecting

dissatisfaction was, "not enough books. I want to be able to browse a collection. I can't place a hold on a book I don't know exists."

Follow-up question asked by Commissioner Burton: inquired if the artwork reflected the unique flavor of each community.

Director Lewis confirmed that they work with the Regional Arts and Culture Council (RACC) to engage artists, and the design process for artwork includes community engagement, ensuring that art installations are reflective of local artists and community involvement.

Commissioner Burton asked: We are excited to see bond project progress continue. These are huge projects, and with possible tariffs and other economic instability, we can imagine supply costs may go up. How are you trending in terms of budget for your projects? If you are expecting costs to be higher than your baseline budgets, how will you fund increases?

Finance and Facilities Director, Katie Shifley stated that the library capital bond project team is delivering library construction and renovation projects on schedule and within budget. Costs have been regularly adjusted as more detailed project information becomes available, but budget flexibility has been maintained thanks to an additional \$50 million premium reserve (due to specific spenddown requirements and initial bond financing setup) and additional earned interest income. She confirmed they do not anticipate costs exceeding available resources for the overall bond.

Regarding supply and tariff issues, lead times for certain mechanical components, particularly large electrical switchgear, have had a greater impact on schedule than supply costs, but have not caused delays in the overall bond life cycle. The project team has planned and adjusted well, making long lead time orders in advance.

Currently, Belmont, St. Johns, East County Library, Albina (very close to opening in July), and Northwest (under construction as a leased facility) are either under construction or upcoming.

Follow-up question asked by Commissioner Donahue: asked if there was a non-bond fund capital reserve and if it was dedicated to specific non-bond projects or acted as a buffer.

Shifley clarified that the library has a separate Library District Capital Fund for library district capital projects, completely unrelated to the ongoing bond work. They recently updated their capital improvement needs and project reinvestment of almost \$100 million in their building portfolio over the next 20 years, separate from the bond investments. This reserve is for long-term sustainable planning for the fiscal health of the library district, enabling continued investment in the system's capital needs.

Question asked by Commissioner Lugo Knapp: Coming hand in hand with changes to the library's infrastructure are staffing adjustments to better fit community need and the new buildings. We'd like to better understand how new spaces are meeting the diverse needs of the community. Under the staffing plan, staff have moved from direct community programs, like pre-literacy, and programs that serve underserved communities, to staff these larger buildings. Do you believe this is the best way to serve the community, and if so, why? And what are you hearing in terms of feedback from the community?

Director Lewis explained that bond improvements expanded the total library space by about 50%, addressing a historical lack of space. New features include gender-neutral restrooms, cultural spaces informed by community, children's play areas, comfy reading spots, enclosed outdoor spaces, teen spaces designed for developmental/social needs, sensory spaces, reading/study areas, and a large auditorium at East County Library. Mobile creative learning programming is expanding through library foundation funding, bringing equipment for digital art and other tech. Faster internet provides technology access.

She acknowledged that outreach programs had historically been expansive due to space limitations but stressed that outreach remains a critical priority. The FY26 budget includes ample funding for continuing outreach services like childcare book delivery, mail service for homebound, and services for adults in custody and youth in justice centers. The "Every Child a Reader" program, supported by the library foundation, continues to reach over 7,000 families speaking 40 different languages by providing culturally and language-specific book bags.

New physical spaces will allow for more services for school-age youth. They continue to offer culturally specific story times, robust collections for children, and teen spaces for teen/tween councils. The Library Connect program, allowing student IDs as library cards, reaches over 100,000 students.

Feedback from superintendents indicated an understanding of the difficult choices agencies face.

Follow-up question asked by Commissioner Lugo Knapp: she inquired how the library communicates changes, especially concerning the perception of beloved programs (like "Listos") going away when other outreach efforts might replace them.

Director Lewis sends out a monthly "director's desk" message posted on the library website and in newsletters, sharing high-level changes directly from her. Additionally, staff, particularly those directly connecting with community members and the contact center, are provided with talking points to support them in explaining changes to families.

Commissioner Moore asked: Will people see their jobs change as a result of the staffing plan in terms of duties and responsibilities? Is there any anticipated re-training needed?

Director Lewis stated that the nature of public library work is evolving with technology, and positions are continually adapting. The staffing plan focuses on reallocating existing resources to ensure sufficient staffing in new locations, with an objective to avoid layoffs wherever possible, which they were successful in doing. However, since there was no additional revenue to add staff, reassigning staff into new roles was necessary.

Seven employees are experiencing a change in job classification with either a neutral or positive impact on wages. Five employees will be downwardly classified but will have no reduction in salaries through "red-lining". Training will be provided for staff changing roles. The Library Safety Liaison classification is ending, and those individuals will have an opportunity to promote to library assistants, which will require the most training. Some Library Outreach Specialist and Program Specialist positions are shifting scope to align with new priorities, maintaining classification or undergoing slight downward classification, but still focusing on outreach and engagement.

Commissioner Donahue asked: The staffing plan prioritizes safety, a topic of concern for staff in recent years. What are the latest trends you are seeing with security incidents - are they going up or down?

Interim Deputy Director Dave Ratliff explained that libraries reflect what happens in the community because they are truly public places, open to everyone. Many patrons face significant challenges like substance use and mental health crises.

The library focuses on de-escalation and trauma-informed practices, partnering with the Crisis Prevention Institute for training. They utilize PICSS (persons in charge), safety coordinators, social workers, and peer navigation specialists (at the Central Library). They also work with the county's Workplace Security Department, which manages the Intercon Security contract, providing uniformed security officers at several locations including Central, Midland, Hollywood, Holgate, Gresham, Northwest, and Gregory Heights. This move helps maintain backup staff when library employees are sick or on vacation.

Regarding trends, they are not seeing an increase or decrease in the overall number of incidents. They typically experience 40 to 50 "major disruptions" a month across their 19 libraries (many at Central Library), including substance use in restrooms, mental health crises, and threats. Non-major incidents, such as sleeping or inappropriate language, occur in the 300 to 400 per month range.

A new security incident reporting system (enterprise-level crisis management software) is launching this summer to provide more nuanced evaluation and data capabilities.

Four key measurable outcomes for their security program include transparency to staff/patrons, accountable practices, reduced incidents and patron exclusions through de-escalation, and a reduction in the percentage of incidents relative to foot traffic. While overall incident numbers might increase due to larger spaces and more people, the goal is to keep the per capita rate decreasing.

The library is taking a holistic approach, including external building "activation" (events, food carts, bike rentals) to promote desirable behaviors. They also partner with the Portland Police Department, Multnomah County Sheriff's Office, and the Workplace Security Department for a cohesive approach.

Follow-up question asked by Commissioner Donahue: Last year we talked about the person-in-charge role - what changes have happened since last year? Are you seeing improvement in recruitment and retention for these positions?

Ratliff stated that while managers and "super PICSS" are hired for those roles, maintaining a balance with other staff who opt-in can be challenging, especially if individuals take time off. To address this, several new supervisor positions have been included in the permanent budget, as these roles inherently require PICSS duties.

Follow-up question asked by Commissioner Burton: Asked how contracted security services were deployed.

Ratliff confirmed that contracted security is present at Central, Midland, Hollywood, Holgate, Gresham, Northwest, and Gregory Heights branches, covering all open hours. Central Library typically has four officers, and Midland Library always has two. They are in uniform.

Commissioner Lugo Knapp asked: The library moved to standardized hours across all branches, with a focus on being open later hours than before. What has feedback been from the community? From staff?

Director Lewis explained that all library and contact center hours were standardized on December 1st. This change was made to offer a consistent experience for patrons and primarily to aid staff scheduling across the system, allowing flexibility to reassign staff and avoid service disruptions. Surveys indicated patrons desire more hours (66 comments for earlier, 47 for later, 40 for standardized hours).

Feedback has been mixed, but people appreciate the consistency. Staff find it easier to pick up shifts, helping to fill last-minute absences. The alignment of the contact center hours also simplified scheduling and reduced public confusion. Director Lewis noted that she was initially nervous about the public response but found there was less concern than anticipated, with more appreciation for consistency.

Commissioner Burton asked: How is the district preparing for projected future deficits for library operations as noted in the Multnomah County Budget Office's financial forecast?

Shifley stated the library district has maintained a cautious and thoughtful approach to budget development. Their planning includes:

- Working closely with county economists to understand property tax trends affecting revenue forecasts.
- Continuously re-evaluating options to reduce their cost curve without negatively impacting service levels, including monitoring budget versus actuals to realign resources.
- Partnering with the Department of County Assets to reduce internal service rates by reviewing telephone usage, device count (laptops/desktops), janitorial costs, and undergoing building-by-building reviews of operations and maintenance costs.
- Realizing efficiencies from new bond-funded technologies like automated materials handling and intelligent materials management, which free up staff time for patron support.
- Clarifying service priorities and articulating what the library does to guide decision-making with limited resources, determining what is "in their lane" versus better suited for community partnerships.
- The Community Partnerships Manager position has started to yield benefits, activating new spaces and leveraging external resources.
- Undertaking a deep understanding of patron values through a revamped biennial qualitative patron survey to understand the "why" behind preferences, informing the next phase of the library strategic plan and future budgeting efforts.

Shifley concluded that while the forecast is challenging, many variables and unknowns exist. FY27 will be the first year stress-testing new staffing and operational models with all new library locations open. The library will continue to make the best plans, use fund balance smartly, monitor the forecast closely, and pivot as needed.

Closing Remarks and Certification

Chair Quiroz thanked the library representatives for their candor and thoughtfulness, acknowledging that it was a hard year for everyone. She highlighted that the library is a cornerstone of the community and representative of the good work being done in the county.

Executive Director Allegra Willhite thanked library staff for their partnership and responsiveness. Staff found the fiscal year 25-26 approved budget estimates to be reasonable for the purposes stated and in substantial compliance with budget law. Staff suggested no recommendations or objections.

Chair Quiroz motioned to authorize the commission to sign the certification letter with the one recommendation as presented by staff. The motion was moved by Commissioner Burton and seconded by Commissioner Lugo Knapp and approved unanimously by all the commissioners present.

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