The Library in the City: Changing Demands and a Challenging Future
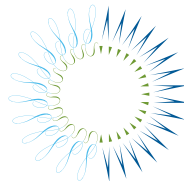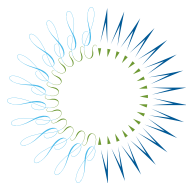
The Library in the City: Changing Demands and a Challenging Future

THE **PEW** | Philadelphia
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Executive Summary

Big-city public libraries have rarely been as popular as they are today and rarely as besieged. The hard economic times of recent years have generated increased demand for the free and varied services libraries provide, even as revenue-challenged local governments have cut back on contributions to library budgets. All of this comes at a time when libraries are being asked to perform a new and changing range of functions.

Due partly to their role as society's default provider of computer and Internet access, today's urban libraries help residents—including those with limited incomes and educations—find jobs, obtain health information, and connect to government services and benefits. In so doing, the institutions are fulfilling what is sometimes called their "shadow mandate," supporting and complementing the work of other public agencies.

They are responding to the changing needs of the urban populations they serve. City residents now see libraries, particularly neighborhood branches, as multipurpose community centers, offering business services, tax assistance, safe havens for children after school, and places where immigrants can learn English. And libraries still lend books and DVDs.

The Free Library of Philadelphia, a $63.6 million system that has been weakened by budget cuts over the last few years, is struggling to keep up with this broad and growing range of demands.[1] Other big-city library systems are struggling, too, although there are some success stories to tell.

To see how Philadelphia is faring, and to understand the challenges facing urban libraries across America, we examined the Free Library's operations and compared them to those of 14 other library systems: Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Brooklyn, Charlotte, Chicago, Columbus (Ohio), Detroit, Los Angeles, Phoenix, Pittsburgh, Queens, San Francisco and Seattle.[2]

Among the findings of the report are:

- Philadelphians use their libraries less than their counterparts in most of the 14 other urban communities studied. On a per capita basis, the Free Library of Philadelphia is below average in terms of circulation and visits, even though it ranks relatively high in terms of branches per capita. Its recent growth in both circulation and visits has been in line with the other cities. Use of library computers in Philadelphia has risen by 80 percent in the last six years; the Free Library ranks 11th of the 15 systems in the number of public-access computers per capita. Philadelphia ranks high in participation in library-sponsored programming, such as storytimes for children and speaker series for adults.

- One factor contributing to Philadelphians' relatively low use of their libraries has been the extraordinary number of times that branches have experienced temporary, unscheduled closings in the past few years. In Fiscal 2010, the system had 8,000 hours of such closings, an increase of more than 1,000 percent from two years earlier. In Fiscal 2011, unplanned closures were down to 3,662 hours. Many of these hours were lost due to staffing shortages, which happened in none of the other cities studied except Detroit.

- The Free Library has been slower than some other big-city libraries to adapt to the changing needs of its population. Other systems have moved more aggressively to open centers for teenagers, increase programming for children, provide health information, adjust hours to encourage maximum patronage, increase the number of public-access computers, and revamp their central libraries to make them more welcoming. Officials at the Free Library said they have plans to take action on several of these fronts; a teen area at the main library, Parkway Central, opened in March 2012.

- In Philadelphia, efforts to adjust to changing customer demands in a tough fiscal environment are complicated by a complex and often cumbersome governing structure. The library is part city agency and part free-standing nonprofit. It reports to two separate governing boards, gets overall policy direction from the mayor's office, and must have its budget approved by City Council.

- Overall library spending in Philadelphia, at $43 per resident in 2011, is slightly below the average for the communities studied. Between 2008 and 2010, when municipal budgets were hit hard by the recession, the Free Library experienced larger cutbacks than many of its counterparts, with staff size down 14 percent, scheduled service hours down 12 percent, and contributions from all levels of government down 19 percent. During that period, city funding of the library declined by a larger percentage than did overall city spending.

To get a sense of how Philadelphians use and regard their library system, the Philadelphia Research Initiative asked 1,600 adult residents a series of questions in a telephone survey conducted in January 2012.

Among the results are these:

- Fifty-one percent of all respondents say they visited a library at least once in the past 12 months, and 30 percent of all respondents went at least once a month.

- Among library users, 57 percent report having taken a child to the library. Ninety-one percent say the library's role as a safe space for children is a "very important" function.

- Fifty-seven percent of adult library patrons say they used a library computer for Internet access, and most did so at least once a month. Usage is higher, 67 percent, among library customers with household incomes under $30,000. The only more popular library activity, engaged in by 79 percent of users, is borrowing books and other materials, evidence that this long-established function retains its importance in the digital age.

- Fifty-six percent of residents and 67 percent of library users say that closing their local branch library would have a "major impact" on the neighborhood. Should more budget cuts be necessary, Philadelphians would prefer to see reductions in branch hours as opposed to branch closings.

Based on the recent experiences of libraries in Philadelphia and in the other cities studied, the report discusses some of the Free Library's challenges and policy options. They include:

- Prioritizing services. In an age of limited resources, library management has to make choices. Today, the library's public-access computers are constantly at capacity while certain special collections are rarely visited; high-profile talks at Parkway Central are in high demand while other programs are sparsely attended.

- Making Parkway Central a more welcoming place, particularly for young people. Often seen as a temple of knowledge, the grand structure is in line for a makeover and expansion. New and refurbished central libraries in other cities feature flexible spaces and large areas for the public, with less area given over to stacks and other behind-the-scenes uses.

- Simplifying the governing structure with a view toward increasing the library's ability to adapt to changing demands and circumstances.

- Reevaluating branch hours to make sure they are distributed in a way that encourages library use. The experience of other library systems suggests that a shift to more weekend service can do a lot to generate visits and circulation. Branch maintenance also is critical.

- Exploring the potential for identifying an achievable, sustainable level of funding and making long-term plans based on that level. In some cities, voters have approved dedicated funding sources for their libraries. ◌

Introduction

In late 2008, as the deepening recession created a huge gap in Philadelphia's city budget, Mayor Michael Nutter proposed closing 11 of the city's 49 neighborhood branch libraries. He noted that Philadelphia had more libraries per capita than any of the nation's 10 largest cities. So closing a few branches, it seemed, should not have been that big a deal. But it was. Residents from neighborhoods throughout the city protested, litigation was filed, and eventually the administration backed down. Nutter has repeatedly called attempting to close branches his "biggest mistake" as mayor.

In 2012, the prospects of the Free Library of Philadelphia are better than in 2008, but major problems persist: The system's budget is smaller than it was then; branches sometimes close unexpectedly due to staffing shortages and maintenance issues; and plans for expansion of Parkway Central have been slowed by fundraising concerns.

Several hundred thousand Philadelphians lack access to the Internet, and more and more of them have come to rely on the library to provide it. The city's high unemployment rate has sent thousands into the library to seek assistance in searching for work. And every year more than 60,000 of Philadelphia's children attend the library's after-school programming. Today, the library—particularly the branches, no matter their size or condition—has become an important portal for Philadelphians seeking access to opportunity and assistance.

None of this is unique to Philadelphia. "People don't know about the breadth and depth of library work—public health, urban gardening, diverse programming for all ages," said John F. Szabo, director of the Atlanta-Fulton Public Library. "In some neighborhoods, libraries are the only safe space for kids. We do it all."

This report describes the varied and often surprising roles the Free Library plays in Philadelphia today. It examines the experiences of other large urban libraries around the country as they face a set of common challenges. It then outlines the opportunities and hurdles in the Free Library's future.
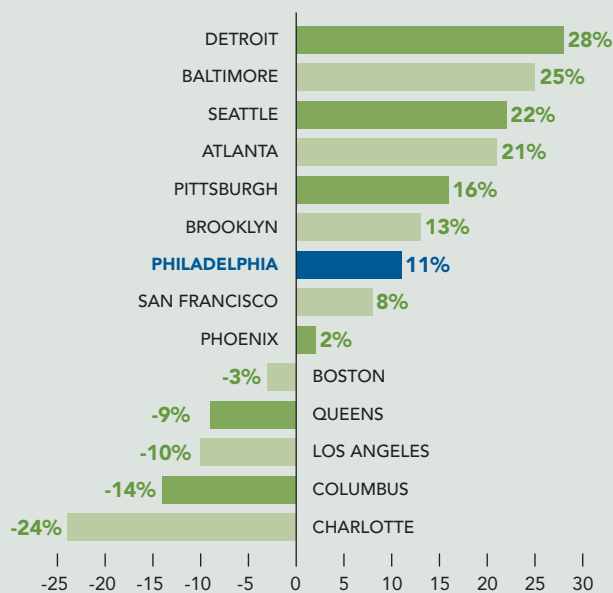
The Rise In Urban Library Use

Across the country, as the roles that libraries play in urban life change and expand, demand for library services is growing. The systems studied for this report recorded an average 6 percent increase in visits and an 18 percent increase in circulation from 2005 to 2011. (See Figures 1 and 2.) This has happened despite budget cuts that have caused reductions in library hours in most cities.

Officials in all of the cities said that the poor economy has played a role in drawing additional users, whether they are looking for jobs or to borrow books or DVDs. Free access to computers and wireless Internet also brings people through the doors.
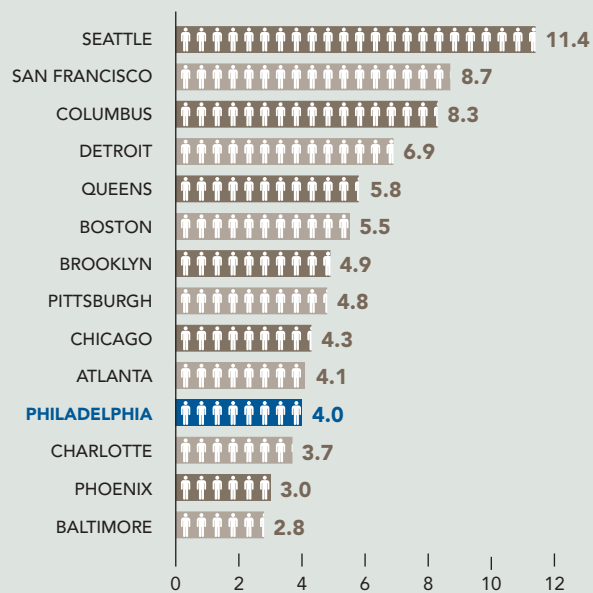
Library visits grew by more than 20 percent during the period in Detroit, Baltimore, Seattle and Atlanta. Circulation increased by more than 30 percent in Seattle, San Francisco, Boston, Chicago, Atlanta and Brooklyn.

In Philadelphia, the growth in library use has been about average. On a per capita basis, however, the Free Library is below average both in terms of visits and circulation.
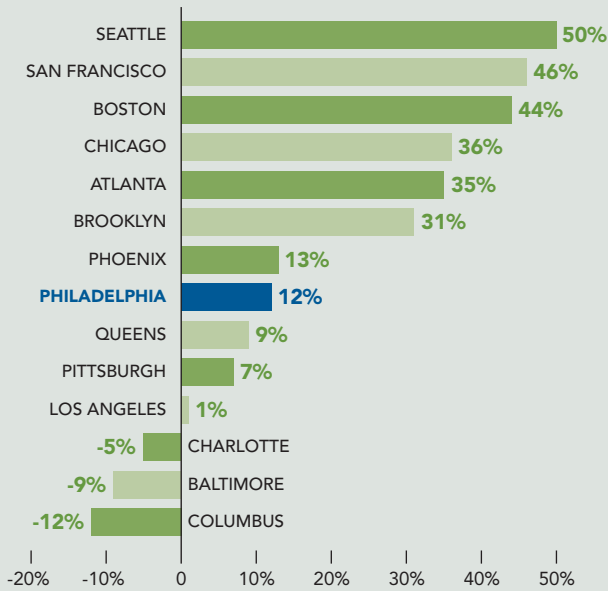
FIGURE 1	CHANGE IN TOTAL LIBRARY VISITS: 2005-2011

City	Change
DETROIT	28%
BALTIMORE	25%
SEATTLE	22%
ATLANTA	21%
PITTSBURGH	16%
BROOKLYN	13%
PHILADELPHIA	11%
SAN FRANCISCO	8%
PHOENIX	2%
BOSTON	-3%
QUEENS	-9%
LOS ANGELES	-10%
COLUMBUS	-14%
CHARLOTTE	-24%

VISITS PER CAPITA: 2011

City	Visits per capita
SEATTLE	11.4
SAN FRANCISCO	8.7
COLUMBUS	8.3
DETROIT	6.9
QUEENS	5.8
BOSTON	5.5
BROOKLYN	4.9
PITTSBURGH	4.8
CHICAGO	4.3
ATLANTA	4.1
PHILADELPHIA	4.0
CHARLOTTE	3.7
PHOENIX	3.0
BALTIMORE	2.8

SOURCES: *Individual library systems and the 2010 United States Census.*

NOTE: *Fiscal Year 2010 data were used for Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh and Seattle; 2011 numbers were not available. In some cities, total visits are based on annual turnstile counts. In others, visits are extrapolated from headcounts taken on selected days. Chicago was excluded from the change analysis because its number of visits was not available for 2005. Los Angeles was excluded from the per capita analysis due to the large number of pedestrians who use its main branch building as a pass-through.*

FIGURE 2

CHANGE IN TOTAL LIBRARY CIRCULATION: 2005-11

City	Change
SEATTLE	50%
SAN FRANCISCO	46%
BOSTON	44%
CHICAGO	36%
ATLANTA	35%
BROOKLYN	31%
PHOENIX	13%
PHILADELPHIA	12%
QUEENS	9%
PITTSBURGH	7%
LOS ANGELES	1%
CHARLOTTE	-5%
BALTIMORE	-9%
COLUMBUS	-12%

CIRCULATION PER CAPITA: 2011

City	Value
SEATTLE	18.3
COLUMBUS	17.2
SAN FRANCISCO	13.2
PHOENIX	9.6
QUEENS	9.2
BROOKLYN	8.1
PITTSBURGH	7.5
CHARLOTTE	6.1
BOSTON	5.8
PHILADELPHIA	4.7
ATLANTA	4.6
LOS ANGELES	4.0
DETROIT	3.6
CHICAGO	3.5
BALTIMORE	2.0
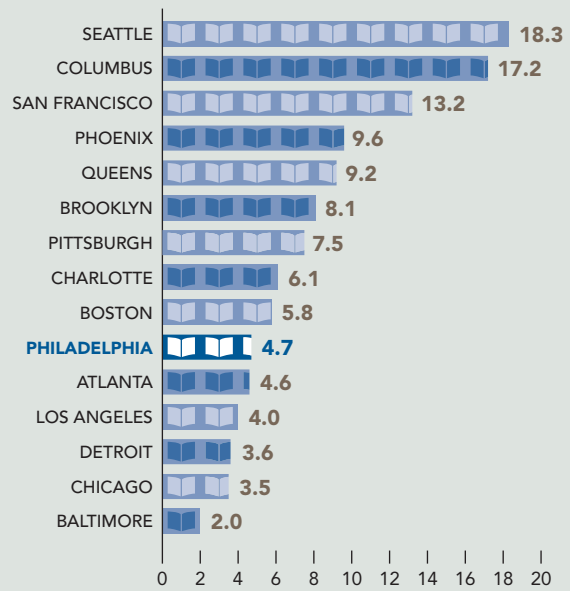
SOURCES: *Individual library systems and the 2010 U. S. Census.*

NOTE: *Circulation includes print and CD/DVD materials. It includes renewals but not electronic downloads, except in Atlanta where downloads could not be separated from total circulation numbers. Fiscal Year 2010 data were used for Atlanta, Chicago, Pittsburgh and Seattle; 2011 numbers were not available. Detroit was excluded from the change in circulation comparison due to uncertainty about local data.*

Demographics play a role in Philadelphia's visit and circulation numbers. Populations with relatively low educational attainment levels—in Philadelphia, about 23 percent of adults over the age of 25 are college graduates, compared with 44 percent in Boston and 56 percent in Seattle—are less likely to patronize a library. But two other factors appear to be at play.

One is the budget cutting that the system has endured as a result of the economic downturn. In the depths of the recession, between Fiscal 2008 and 2010, the Free Library's income from local, state and federal sources fell 19 percent.

As discussed more fully later in this report, budget cuts in Philadelphia have hindered the library's ability to conduct outreach and expand programming. They have led to deferred maintenance of library buildings and longer waits for books, all factors that diminish the library's appeal. They also caused reductions in library hours and a dramatic increase in temporary unscheduled closings due to staff shortages, sometimes for an hour or two, other times for days. (See Figure 3.) This is a problem seen far more in Philadelphia than in the other cities.

Work rules in Philadelphia require that four library personnel, including a security guard, be present to open a branch; few of the other systems studied have minimum staff requirements, and most do not mandate the presence of security guards at every branch. When a branch employee gets sick or goes on vacation in Philadelphia, another staff member from elsewhere in the system is called in. With a smaller staff, there often are not enough people to cover all of the slots.

In Fiscal 2008, before the nationwide financial crisis hit, the Free Library experienced 690 hours of unplanned closures. Only 51 of those hours at 17 branches were caused by staff shortages; the rest were due to emergency maintenance issues. The following year, in the wake of recession-related budget cuts, total closings grew to 3,296 hours, including 2,398 hours at 46 branches due to staff shortages. Five branches were closed for more than 15 days each.

Then the situation worsened. In Fiscal 2010, unscheduled closings reached 8,000 hours, more than three-fourths of them due to staff shortages; every facility in the system except Parkway Central, the Lucien E. Blackwell West Regional Library, and the Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped was affected. In 2011, such closures were down to 3,662 hours, with less than half due to staffing. This improvement was made possible by the hiring of additional security guards and changes to branch schedules.

"We could bring 10 libraries down to four-day-a-week schedules [from the current five] and elimi-nate this problem, but create inequities in branch schedules," explained Free Library President and Director Siobhan Reardon referring to the rolling closures due to staffing shortages. "The current five-day schedule is how we maintain an equitable system."

FIGURE 3   PHILADELPHIA FREE LIBRARY HOURS OF UNSCHEDULED CLOSURES BY CAUSE: FISCAL 2008-2011
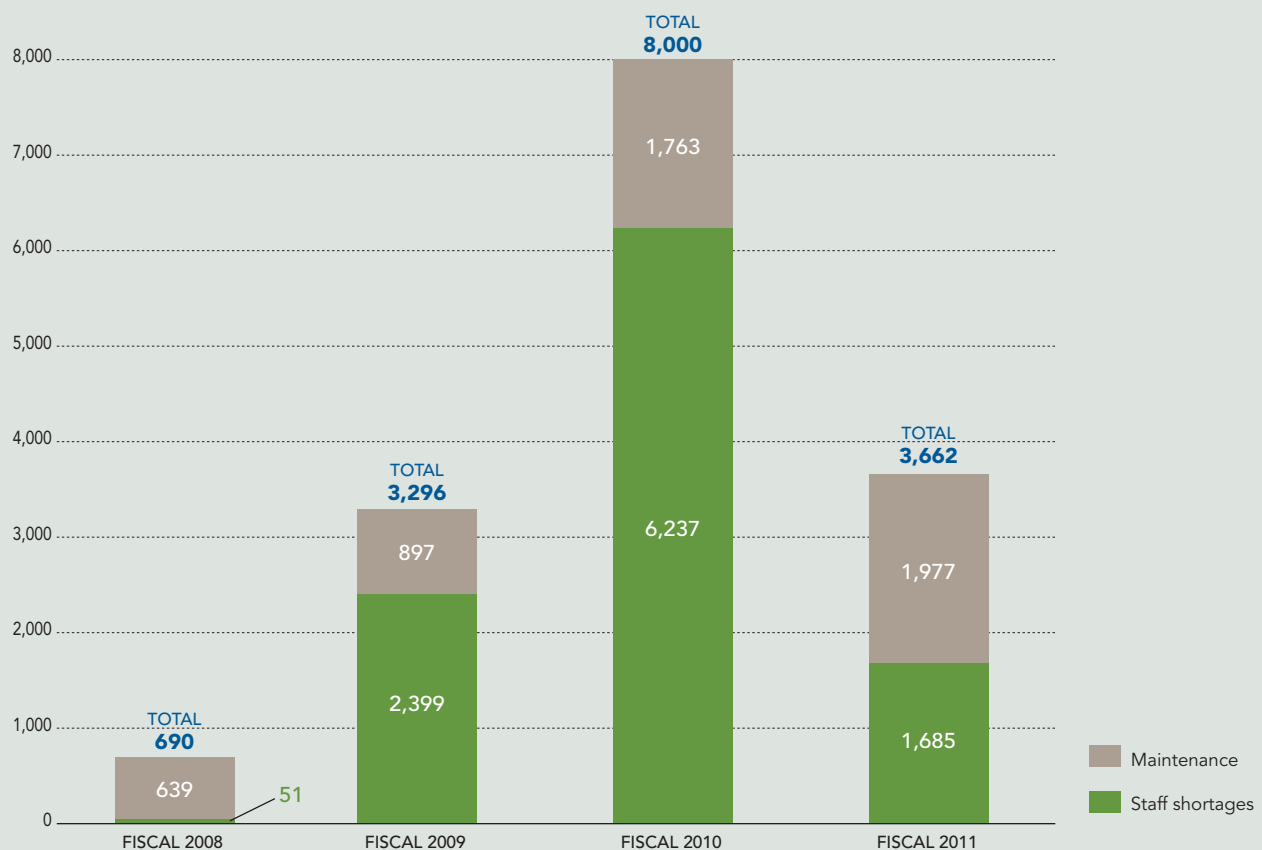
SOURCE: *Free Library of Philadelphia.*

NOTES: *Does not include closures for snow, which totaled 1,165 hours in 2010 and 616 in 2011. The period depicted runs from July 1, 2007 through June 30, 2011.*

Until recently, Philadelphia was the only library system of those we studied that reported chronic, unscheduled closures due to staffing shortages. Detroit began to encounter this problem in 2011. With a newly reduced budget and staff in 2012, Chicago anticipates possible unscheduled closures in the future.

COMPARISON CITIES

This report compares the Free Library of Philadelphia to 14 other large library systems that represent the range of urban libraries in the United States. We selected these systems because they shared key characteristics with the Free Library of Philadelphia, represented comparable regions, provided geographic diversity, or were particularly powerful examples of the challenges and possibilities that public libraries are grappling with today.

Of the systems studied, Phoenix's serves about the same number of people as Philadelphia's; Brooklyn's has a similar number of branches; and the Chicago and Queens systems, like Philadelphia's, are used by a large number of patrons who arrive by foot or public transit. Baltimore and Detroit, like Philadelphia, have high levels of illiteracy and poverty, both of which impact the work of a library system.

The Boston Public Library, like the Free Library of Philadelphia, traditionally has functioned both as a center of research and cultural life—and as a provider of neighborhood services. The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, like the Free Library, is funded in part by the state of Pennsylvania and recently experienced heated opposition to proposed branch closings.

Library systems in Seattle, San Francisco and Columbus, Ohio, have been widely commended for their overall quality, inventiveness, and level of citizen support. We included Atlanta and Los Angeles to give us additional geographic diversity. Charlotte is an example of a system decimated by recession-related spending cuts. It is one of three systems in our comparison group, along with Atlanta-Fulton and Columbus Metropolitan, that operate on a countywide basis.

Throughout the report, we often refer to library systems by the name of the central city each serves rather than by its formal name.

Another contributing factor is that the Free Library of Philadelphia has been slower than library systems in some other cities to adapt to the needs of patrons.

At the Brooklyn Public Library, where circulation was up 31 percent from 2005 to 2011, officials point to investment in children's materials and programming as one driver of their institution's growing popularity. Baltimore and Seattle, where visits rose 25 and 22 percent respectively, benefited from opening new or refurbished neighborhood branches.

Atlanta's libraries increased GED instruction. Those in Boston, Los Angeles and Chicago opened centers for teenagers, a group previously considered largely beyond the reach of libraries; the Free Library opened a teen area at Parkway Central in March 2012. San Francisco standardized and increased its programming for children; the most popular storytime programs are offered in every neighborhood on a regular basis.

DIGITAL DOWNLOADS: EBOOKS AND MORE

A small piece of the circulation story in urban libraries is digital downloading: ebooks, audio books, music and video. Digital downloads have grown rapidly in recent years, up 217 percent in Los Angeles between 2005 and 2010 and up more than 800 percent in Phoenix. Still, they account for just a fraction of the resources used by customers. Boston, Seattle and Chicago were the only systems where downloads accounted for more than 1 percent of all circulated items in 2010. Boston had the largest share at 3.5 percent.

The rise in downloads is sure to continue, and libraries are taking steps to see that it does. Baltimore started lending e-readers in 2011. Pittsburgh has a traveling tech van that teaches people how to use electronic tablets. Philadelphia recently piloted a program in which individuals age 50 and older who attend a class on using e-readers can then borrow them from the library for two weeks.

Officials at the Free Library of Philadelphia call their Web site the system's second-largest branch—because it gets more visits than any building other than Parkway Central. But the library has a long way to go before it becomes largely virtual.

Library systems also have responded to community needs through scheduling. It is not so much a matter of how many hours branches are open but which ones, with weekend hours the key.

Branches in Atlanta, Columbus, Seattle and San Francisco have Sunday hours. In Philadelphia, there are Sunday hours only at Parkway Central and Northeast Regional, with Saturday hours at about half of the branches. The evidence from other cities suggests that weekend hours and higher-than-average usage go hand in hand; systems with Sunday hours have higher numbers of annual visits.[3]

"Many customers who need access to our materials and services simply cannot visit us on weekdays," said Sari Feldman, former president of the Public Library Association, the national membership organization of public libraries, and executive director of the Cuyahoga County Public Library in Ohio. "When we look at our average of customer visits by hour, Sundays have actually been our busiest days."

Philadelphia's hours also can create confusion, potentially discouraging patronage. Some branches have longer hours on Mondays and Wednesdays, others on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Some are open on Fridays, others on Saturdays. Some close at 6 p.m., others at 8. All are open in the afternoons, Monday through Thursday, when schoolchildren use them the most.

The idea behind Philadelphia's staggered branch scheduling is that when one branch is closed, another one is open nearby. But cumbersome bus routes, dangerous intersections, and highways or railroad tracks can make it hard for neighborhood residents without cars to get to the next closest branches. "On Saturdays when we're closed, the Tacony branch is open," said one Holmesburg librarian. "But it takes multiple buses to get there, and nobody's going to do that."

Another factor that has increased usage in other cities has been the reinvigoration of central libraries. Large capital initiatives in Baltimore, Pittsburgh and Seattle, among other places, have transformed central libraries from temples of knowledge into more welcoming, user-friendly destinations. Philadelphia's plans to expand its Parkway Central Library were slowed when the recession hindered fundraising.

One area in which the Free Library has excelled is attendance at programs, which include storytimes for children, resumé assistance for job seekers, and high-profile speaker series for the general public. On a per capita basis, program attendance in Philadelphia, which was 639,049 in 2011, exceeds the average of the other systems studied by nearly 50 percent. ◌

The Free Library of Philadelphia

The Free Library of Philadelphia was chartered in 1891. The first branches were built in the early 1900s with funds from steel magnate Andrew Carnegie and other philanthropists of the era. The Parkway Central Library opened in 1927. Today, the system is many different things:

- A system of 54 libraries and six free-standing public computer labs, called "hot spots," serving a city of 1.5 million residents. Of the 54 buildings, 49 are small branches serving specific neighborhoods. Three much larger regional libraries—in West, Northwest and Northeast Philadelphia—have additional reference materials, computers and meeting space. A separate branch focuses on materials for the blind and physically handicapped.

- A collection of 4.4 million books, ebooks, DVDs and magazine subscriptions; 930 public access computers; and 1,601 electronic databases, all available free of charge to people who live, work or go to school in Philadelphia.

- A massive service and educational organization offering after-school and summer programming, career assistance and computer training, free wireless access, large-scale author events, and space for English as a Second Language and literacy classes.

- A state resource library making materials for the blind and physically handicapped and databases available to libraries throughout Pennsylvania.

- A museum housing an eclectic collection that includes medieval manuscripts, rare classical sheet music, Andy Warhol prints, Rembrandt etchings, and the largest collection of historic automobile manuals outside of Detroit.
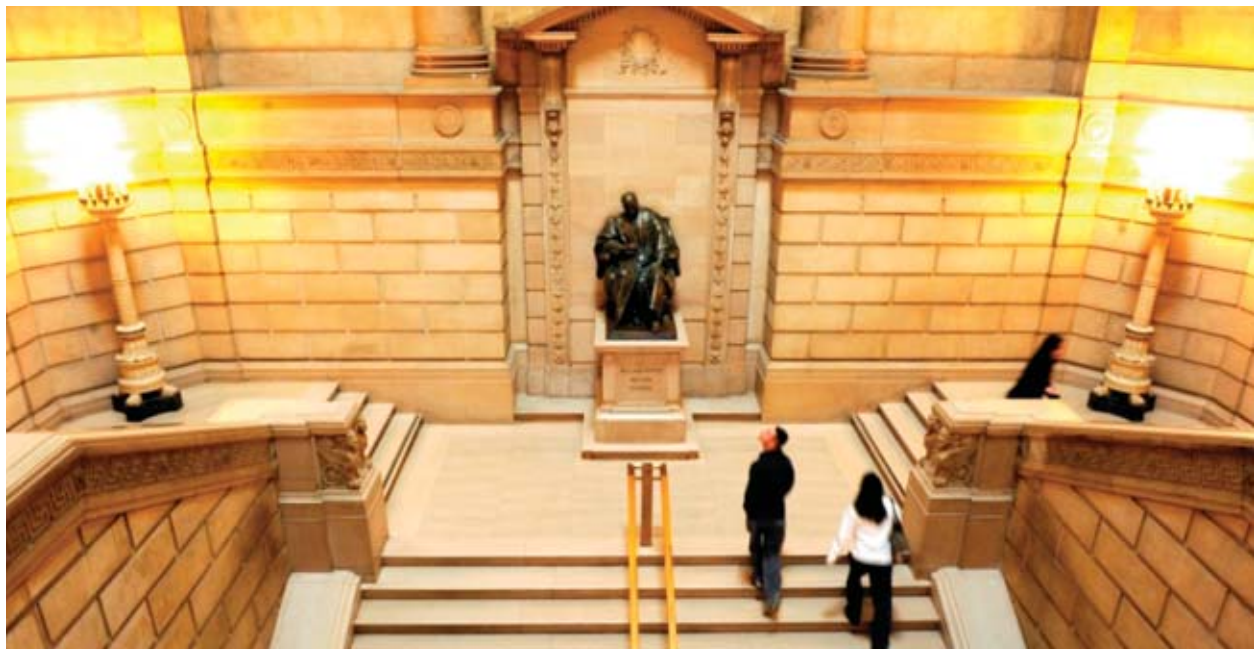
WHO USES THE FREE LIBRARY?

Fifty-one percent of adult Philadelphians visited the Free Library in 2011, and 30 percent visited at least once a month, according to the Philadelphia Research Initiative's recent survey of 1,600 city residents.

Fifty-three percent of African Americans say they visited the library last year, compared with 48 percent of whites and 47 percent of Hispanics. In terms of age, Philadelphia's library use is highest for people between the ages of 35 and 49 (60 percent) and lowest for those over 65 (33 percent).

Educational attainment is a key factor in determining whether or not someone uses the library. Sixty percent of Philadelphians with college degrees use the library, compared with 45 percent of those with high school educations or less.

There is no significant difference in library use across the income scale; 51 percent of those with household incomes under $30,000 describe themselves as library users, as do 52 percent with household incomes over $100,000.

Library use is higher in Northwest Philadelphia (57 percent) and Northeast Philadelphia (55 percent) and lower in South Philadelphia (44 percent). The poll did not produce statistically significant data for Center City or the River Wards.

Most Philadelphians rely more on their neighborhood library than the main library on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. Seventy-nine percent of library patrons usually go to their local branch—or one of the three regional libraries—while 14 percent rely primarily on Parkway Central. Six percent used both.
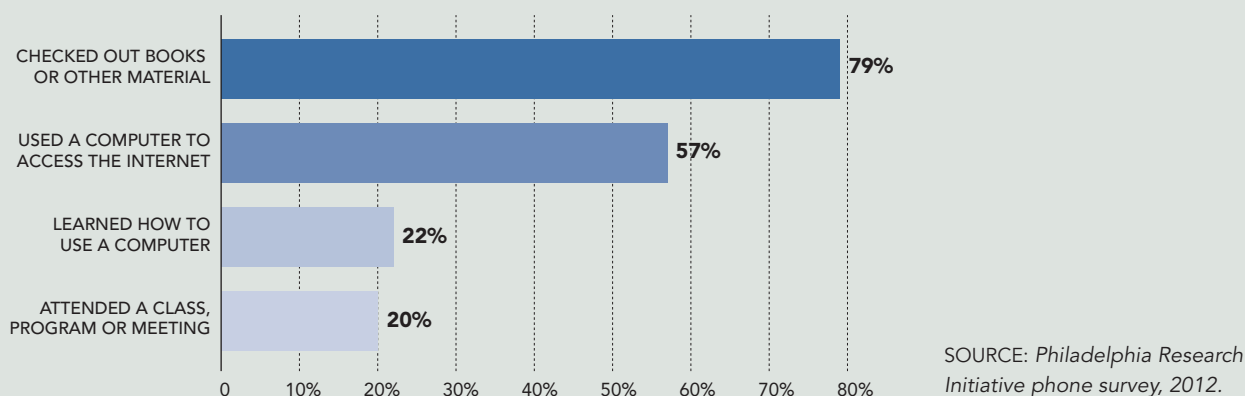
HOW ARE PATRONS USING THE LIBRARY?

While the Free Library continues to provide its long-established core services, the range of other uses is growing rapidly, mirroring the changing demands and needs of city residents.

The top use of the library in Philadelphia remains checking out library books or DVDs, according to our survey. Seventy-nine percent of adult library users report having checked out library material in the past year.

At the same time, 57 percent of library users say they used a computer to access the Internet, and 22 percent received assistance in learning how to use a computer. (See Figure 4.)

Blacks are more likely to use library computers than whites, 64 percent to 46 percent; people with high school educations or less are more likely to use them than college graduates, 62 percent to 43 percent; and people with household incomes under $30,000 are more apt to use them than those in the $100,000-plus category, 67 percent to 37 percent. Younger Philadelphians use the computers more often than older residents.
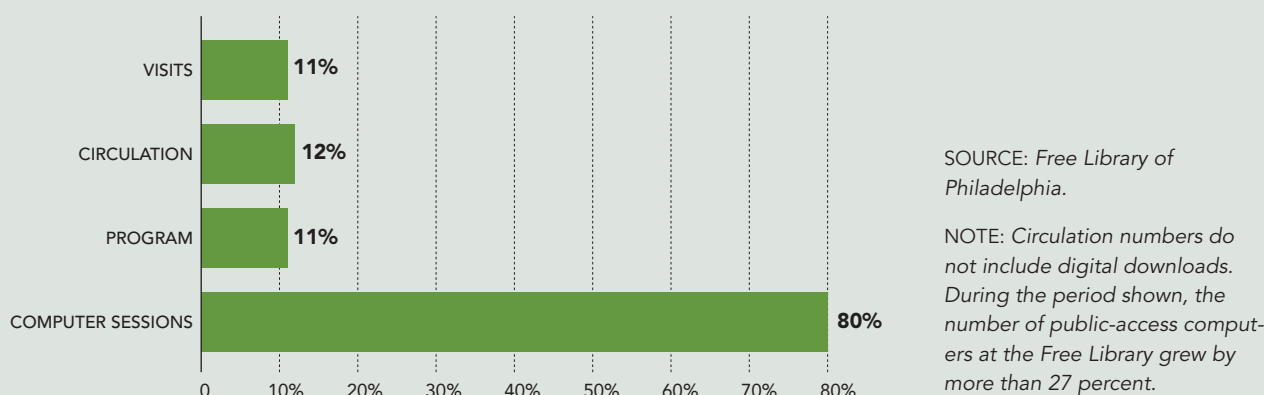
FIGURE 4	POLL: WHAT PATRONS HAVE DONE AT THE FREE LIBRARY IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS

CHECKED OUT BOOKS OR OTHER MATERIAL: **79%**
USED A COMPUTER TO ACCESS THE INTERNET: **57%**
LEARNED HOW TO USE A COMPUTER: **22%**
ATTENDED A CLASS, PROGRAM OR MEETING: **20%**

SOURCE: *Philadelphia Research Initiative phone survey, 2012.*

Over the last six years, a period in which library visits and circulation grew modestly, the number of computer sessions rose by 80 percent.[4] (See Figure 5.)

These numbers only begin to tell the story of how the public's demands on libraries are changing.

FIGURE 5	GROWTH IN USES OF THE FREE LIBRARY OF PHILADELPHIA: 2005-2011

VISITS: **11%**
CIRCULATION: **12%**
PROGRAM: **11%**
COMPUTER SESSIONS: **80%**

SOURCE: *Free Library of Philadelphia.*

NOTE: *Circulation numbers do not include digital downloads. During the period shown, the number of public-access computers at the Free Library grew by more than 27 percent.*

WHY DO PHILADELPHIANS USE THE LIBRARY?

Behind the change in *how* people use the Free Library are the reasons *why* patrons come to the library—as shown in our survey. Among adult library users in the last year:

- 34 percent got health information.

- 29 percent looked for jobs.

- 23 percent applied for government services or benefits.

- 18 percent studied for a test, such as the GED.

A recent research study by the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) concluded: "Libraries often provide resources and services to other schools, government agencies, and community-based organizations that are not accounted for in the library budget or financial reports."[5] The IMLS referred to this development as the "shadow mandate."

With many employers—including SEPTA and some McDonald's franchises—requiring online applications, many Philadelphians depend on the library's computers for finding work. Observed Carol Barta, a librarian in the Holmesburg branch, "Today, computers are a barrier to entry into the workforce. I don't know what our patrons would do without our computers. At least once a day, I'm helping someone apply for a job."

The library also provides job seekers with books and subscription databases on resumé-writing, interviewing, choosing a career, and finding job postings. All of this is complemented by library programming. This past year, the library reported that attendance at library career-related programs exceeded 7,000 and that librarians fielded an additional 7,000 job-related reference questions.

CAN THERE EVER BE ENOUGH LIBRARY COMPUTERS?

The demand for library computers seems inexhaustible. Visit any branch of the Free Library on a weekday afternoon and most, if not all, of the computers are in use. And the same is true in other cities.

"Computer use is directly related to how many hours we are open," said Vick Phillips, chief executive officer of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library in North Carolina. "We are constantly at capacity."

To maximize the number of people using library computers, the Free Library of Philadelphia limits patrons to half-an-hour per day on the computers in the branches and an hour at the regional libraries and Parkway Central. There is no time limit at library computer labs, when there is no class in session.

These time limits do not sit well with many patrons. "Thirty minutes is not enough time," said one young man at the Kingsessing branch in Southwest Philadelphia. "I understand that everyone needs access, but on some days you really need the computer for longer."

The Free Library is increasing its investment in technology; there are long-term plans to offer loaner laptops for in-library use and to increase the number of public-access computer stations at Parkway Central. But does the high demand mean libraries should buy more and more public-access computers? Not necessarily. Technology changes rapidly, noted Philadelphia Free Library Director Siobhan Reardon, adding that there is no way to foresee "what technology is going to be needed down the road."

In fact, demand for public-access computers has started to decline in Brooklyn, Columbus and Los Angeles, as more people bring their own laptops to the library to use free wireless Internet. Richard Reyes-Gavilan, Brooklyn's chief librarian, attributes this development to laptops becoming more affordable.

One-Stop Shop for a Range of Services

In many respects, urban libraries are now the main neighborhood portals for a wide variety of social and government resources and services. Said librarian Regina Johnson of the Joseph E. Coleman Northwest Philadelphia Regional Library, "The other day, a woman who works at a daycare center lost her Department of Public Welfare certification. She didn't know how to use a computer. So I helped her find the information she needed. Then this year, tax forms were not sent home, so we had lots of people coming in for their tax forms. … When [the U.S. Department of] Housing and Urban Development had two weeks in which they were accepting online applications for Section 8 [vouchers for rent subsidies], we were inundated. People come in for help getting unemployment benefits even when they could go to an unemployment office down the street. People just think of the library as the first place to go."

The library's role in helping patrons locate services takes three forms:

- Internet access connecting citizens to government forms and other online information.
- Programming on specific topics such as enrolling in Medicare or personal investing, much of which is provided by community groups that use the library's meeting rooms, some by the library itself.
- Specialized resources such as online GED test preparation or books and software programs for English-language learners and job seekers.

By connecting Philadelphians to services and providing resources, the library supports the work of many public agencies and nonprofit service providers. These include the school district, the city Health Department, and the homeless services provider Project H.O.M.E. (See Figure 6.)

FIGURE 6   HOW THE LIBRARY SUPPORTS GOVERNMENT AND NONPROFIT AGENCIES

• Hard-copy job postings
• Assistance with city's job application system

• Homework help at LEAP and online
• Resource for schools with no library
• Outreach to educators
• Class visits to library
• Summer reading and science programs

• Job search workshops
• Computer skills classes
• Access to online postings

• Project H.O.M.E. clients do cafe and custodial work
• A daytime space for homeless individuals

Workforce

City Human Resources

Homeless Services

Schools

Aging Services

• Senior services at Parkway Central
• Job help for older workers
• Medicare information
• E-reader training and lending

• Learning materials
• Tutor training
• Site of Mayor's Commission on Literacy

Literacy

Commission on Disabilities

• Audio, Braille and large-print materials

Free Library of Philadelphia

• Library cards and books in maternity wards
• Daycare center outreach
• Storytime at branches
• Workshops on reading readiness

Early Childhood

Business Services

• Women's business development center
• Business planning classes
• Trade magazines

• Cultural programming
• Prints and Pictures collection
• Information on city funding for community arts
• One Percent for Art program

Arts & Creative Economy

Revenue Collection

• Hard-copy tax forms
• Tax assistance

**Franklin Institute

Please Touch Museum**

English Language Learners

Public Health

Office of Innovation & Technology

• Partner in city's broadband adoption initiative

• LEAP into Science program for grades K-4

• Free access through Play Pass Program

• ESL materials
• TOEFL test prep
• Conversation groups
• Talks on immigration matters

• General information
• Lectures on topics like women's health and Alzheimer's disease
• Healthy cooking classes

This diagram illustrates the ways in which the work done by the Free Library of Philadelphia complements work done by numerous public agencies, organizations and institutions. It is by no means exhaustive. Each circle lists some of the activities or resources the library provides that support that entity or service area.

Sometimes arrangements develop through deliberate partnerships. Project H.O.M.E. operates a cafe and conducts homeless outreach in the Parkway Central Library. The city Department of Human Resources posts all city-government jobs at the branch libraries and provides instruction sheets to help people apply for them online.

More often than not, however, the relationship is less formal or official, which makes the impact hard to measure. While the library's Office of Public Service Support manages some of the large programs and partnerships including the Free Library's Literacy Enrichment After-School Program (LEAP), English Language Conversation groups, and summer reading for children and teens, many other local programs and partnerships are coordinated by individual branches. They are dependent on relationships between individual branch librarians and individual government officials and nonprofit leaders. Rarely does the library receive additional funding from other agencies for providing these services.

"I have never seen the library more needed," said Northeast Area Administrator Toni Hoagland. "We're doing more and more social services, and we will continue to move in that direction." Hedra Packman, the recently departed director of Library Services for the Free Library asked, "Should we, can we, keep funding it all on our own?"

PARTNERSHIPS IN OTHER CITIES

Partnerships with other institutions can expand the reach and impact of urban public libraries, and sometimes provide funding.

With a small grant from Medicare and in partnership with Albert Einstein College of Medicine, the library in Queens offers health-literacy classes and information at the branches where the need is biggest.

In Atlanta, the library partnered with the county health department and several universities to put a library presence in a health center, providing computer access as well as print and electronic materials appropriate for a low-literate clientele.

In Chicago, the local Federal Reserve System and several banks work with the library to provide adult and youth financial-literacy programming.

Another widely praised partnership is the Chicago Public Library's Great Kids Museum Passport. Through a collaboration between the library and 14 cultural institutions in the city, funded by Kraft Foods, every branch is given free passes to the city's top cultural attractions. Passes can be checked out for up to a week. Destinations include the Art Institute of Chicago, Brookfield Zoo, Chicago Children's Museum and Shedd Aquarium. A large board at the branch entrance tells patrons which passes are available.

A Safe Space Where Children Can Learn

The largest part of the library's programmatic offerings centers on children. This is vital, considering that less than half the city's public schools have on-site libraries. Thirty-seven percent of library card-holders are children; in our poll, 57 percent of adult library users said they took a child to a library last year.

LEAP is one of the biggest free after-school programs in the city. Staffed by high school and college students, it provides homework help and enrichment activities four days a week in all of the library's branches. In Fiscal 2011, more than 60,000 children attended LEAP, according to Packman.[6] The program, which had its city Department of Human Services funding cut in the fall of 2011, survives due to support from the Free Library Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated solely to raising money for the library.

"The library is *the* place for kids to come after school," said a woman using the Kensington branch.

Through children's programs—including summer reading, storytimes, school visits, and Books Aloud, which is designed to help caregivers prepare young children for reading—the Free Library touches a large portion of Philadelphia's youth.

Asked in our survey to rank the various roles the library plays, the largest share of respondents, 91 percent, rated "providing a safe place for children and families" as "very important." Mayor Nutter said in an interview: "The libraries are quite possibly the safest haven other than a church, synagogue or mosque in the city of Philadelphia."

Other "very important" roles for libraries, according to the poll, include "providing a quiet place to study and read," 89 percent; "providing access to computers and the Internet," 85 percent; and "providing access to books, magazines and DVDs," 80 percent.

HOW IS THE LIBRARY FUNDED?

In the fiscal year ending June 30, 2011, the city of Philadelphia spent about $44.1 million on the Free Library.[7] That was 1.2 percent of the city's total general fund budget of $3.8 billion.

A little over two-thirds of the library's operating funds come from the city, another 17 percent from the state, and the remaining 15 percent from private sources including fines on overdue library materials.

Compared with other library systems, the Free Library gets a relatively high proportion of its funding from state and private sources. Figure 7 illustrates the funding mix for several different library systems across the country. Most of the 15 libraries studied for this report rely more heavily on their local governments than does Philadelphia. Eleven get more than 70 percent of their annual income from their city or county. Four get more than 90 percent from those sources.

Most of Philadelphia's private support comes from the Free Library Foundation. Money from the foundation is used for library programming and special collections. In Fiscal 2010, among the 15 library systems studied, only those in Brooklyn and Chicago received more private operating funds than the Free Library.

The relatively high level of state support is the result of a Pennsylvania law requiring the state Department of Education to provide funding to libraries that meet basic quality standards in their collections. Philadelphia and Pittsburgh receive additional state dollars because they serve as designated regional resource libraries; some of their collections and services are available to the larger surrounding area.

FIGURE 7	LIBRARY FUNDING MIX FOR SELECTED CITIES: 2010
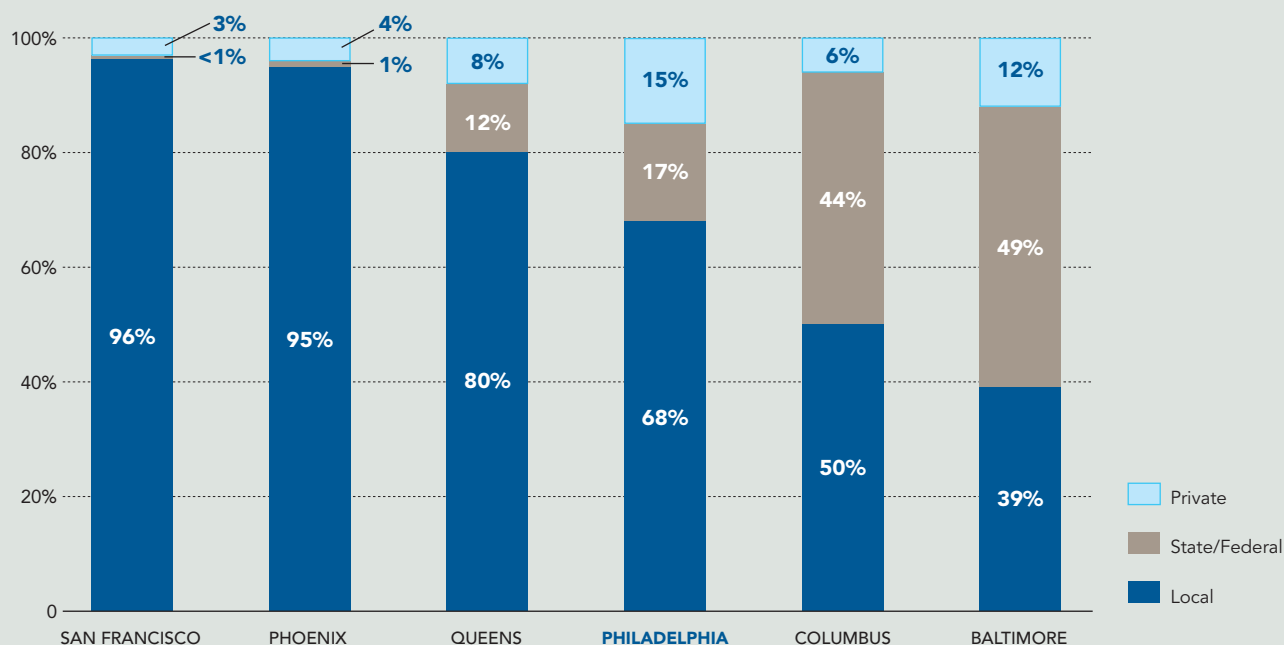
SOURCES: *Individual library systems.*

NOTE: *Donations and grants make up the majority of the "private" category, which in some cities also includes revenue from fines, fees and investments. Some government grants are classified as private if they pass through a library's foundation.*

FIGURE 8   LIBRARY SPENDING PER CAPITA: 2011
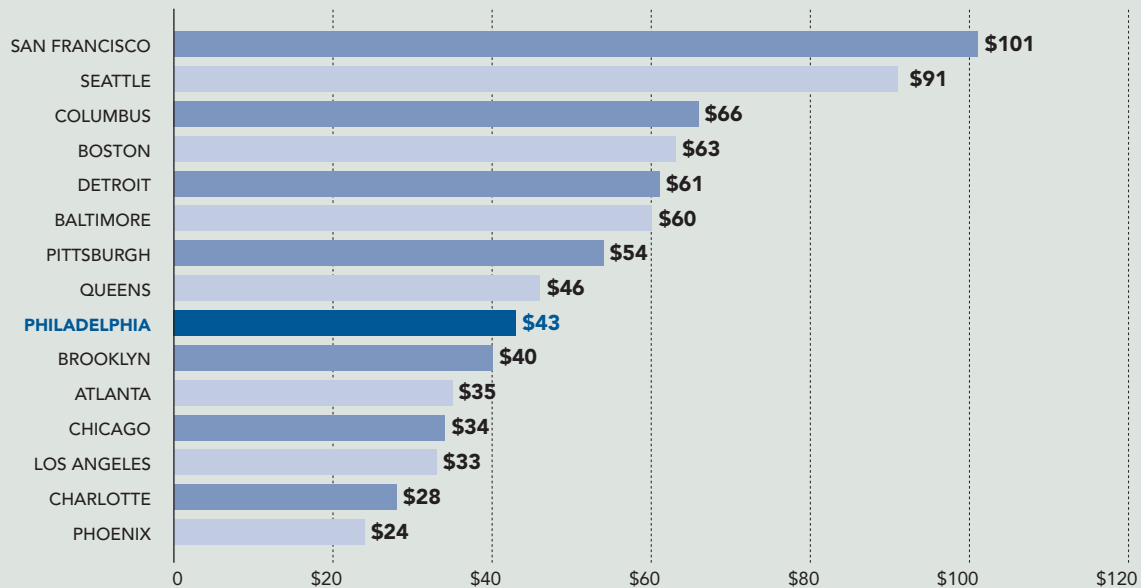
SOURCES: *Individual library systems and the 2010 U. S. Census.*

NOTE: *Numbers represent all spending, including employee benefits and private expenditures. Baltimore, Brooklyn, Charlotte and Pittsburgh do not have separate foundations. In some library systems, certain maintenance and technology costs are covered by other local agencies; this chart does not capture those expenditures.*

Figure 8 shows per capita library spending for the 15 urban library systems studied. In 2011, the Free Library spent roughly $43 per resident, which was slightly lower than the average.

According to William Fleming, the Free Library's director of Administrative Services, 75 percent of the library's budget "goes to payroll, 10 percent to materials, and the rest to what we call adminis- trative support, which includes anything related to technology like leases for our public-access com- puters, and maintenance and security."

LIBRARY FINES

When many people think of library revenue, they think about fines. The amount of money raised from overdue books and other materials, however, does not amount to all that much. In Fiscal 2011, the Free Library of Philadelphia collected about $425,000 in fines, less than 1 percent of its $65.8 million total spending.

The late fee for most materials is 25 cents a day; for DVDs, it is $1. Fines are capped at $10. Children are charged a nickel a day, up to $2 per item. Free Library Associate Director Joseph McPeak said that steeper fines would not necessarily produce more revenue. In 2004, when the library increased the daily DVD fine to $2.50, revenue actually fell. When fines get too high, some patrons stop returning materials and others stop borrowing from the library altogether.

According to an agreement between the Free Library and the mayor's office, the first $276,000 collected in fines each year goes to the city general fund. Whatever is left is used to operate volunteer programs, conduct outreach to children, purchase books and materials, and pay for technological needs.

Libraries and the Recession

The recession took its toll on library budgets, even as it increased the demand for the free services that libraries provide. All but one of the cities studied for this report, San Francisco, have experienced recession-related budget cuts since 2008. In some cities, the fiscal threat to library services sparked successful public campaigns to increase funding. In other cities, including Philadelphia, the library continues to feel the impact of the cuts.
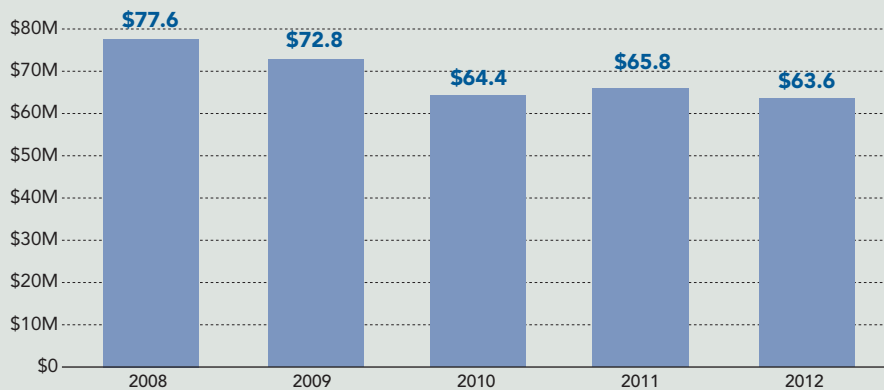
PHILADELPHIA

In 2008, the Free Library's spending was at an all-time high of about $77.6 million.[8] A 10-year $50 million capital campaign to renovate branch libraries had recently concluded. The library pledged to start weekend hours at all branches. Circulation and visits were increasing. Siobhan Reardon, a rising star in library administration, had been named director after a year-long search. And the library was seeking funds to build an ambitious extension onto the Parkway Central Library.

Then the economy crashed, and the city began to cut spending. In the fall of 2008, Mayor Nutter and the library board announced a plan to permanently close 11 library branches, about 20 percent of the total system. The administration estimated that the closures would save $8 million per year. Targeted libraries either were within a half-mile of other branches or had comparatively low attendance. Protests ensued, organized largely by the Friends of the Free Library, a grassroots organization that works to strengthen the connection between Philadelphians and their libraries. A lawsuit was filed, and the judge hearing the case stopped the closures, commenting that the shuttering of branches would "change the very foundation of our City."[9]

Unable to carry through with the closings, the Nutter administration reduced the library's budget in other areas by $7.4 million. Since then, the budget has continued to shrink due to a combination of city and state funding cuts. Federal stimulus funds account for the slight increase in Fiscal 2011. (See Figure 9.)

FIGURE 9 — FREE LIBRARY OF PHILADELPHIA EXPENDITURES IN MILLIONS: FISCAL YEARS 2008-2012

SOURCES: *Free Library of Philadelphia and the City of Philadelphia.*

NOTE: *Numbers represent all spending, including employee benefits.*

Staff cuts have impacted every library department. Maintenance staff has been reduced and needed repairs put off as a result. A reduction in the number of library aides sorting and shelving books and drivers transporting those books—combined with an increase in the number of books a patron can request at one time—means it now takes longer to receive a volume requested from another branch. Before the cuts, it took three to four days. More recently, some patrons have reported waits of a week or two, although those waits now appear to be getting shorter.

One of the most noticeable impacts has been the reduction in branch hours, scheduled and unscheduled, discussed earlier in this report. And branches are now open five days a week instead of six.

THE OTHER CITIES

Among the other library systems studied, the impact of the economy on budgets has varied. Figure 10 shows the change in total public revenue—local, state and federal—for libraries from Fiscal 2008 through Fiscal 2010, the depths of the recession, with Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Detroit having experienced the biggest reductions.[10] The average change was a drop of about 10 percent.

In Fiscal 2011, library budget cuts continued in Brooklyn, Boston, Chicago, Charlotte, Detroit, Queens and Seattle.[11] At the same time, Atlanta, Phoenix and Baltimore received modest budget increases. Budgets for the other libraries were relatively stable.

FIGURE 10 CHANGE IN LIBRARY REVENUE FROM ALL LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT: 2008-2010

SAN FRANCISCO	5%
SEATTLE	-1%
BROOKLYN	-4%
PHOENIX	-4%
QUEENS	-4%
PITTSBURGH	-6%
BALTIMORE	-6%
BOSTON	-10%
CHARLOTTE	-10%
COLUMBUS	-12%
ATLANTA	-13%
DETROIT	-15%
PHILADELPHIA	-19%
LOS ANGELES	-34%
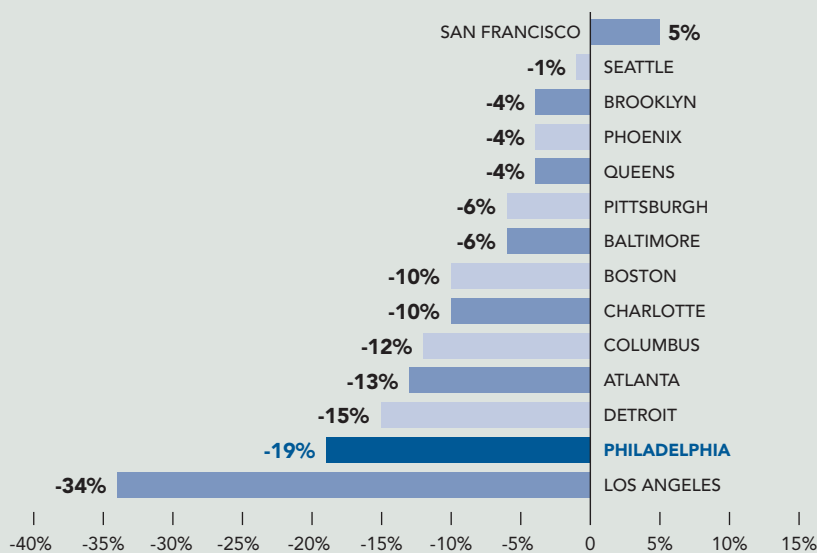
SOURCES: *Public Library Association, Institute of Museum and Library Services, and individual systems.*

NOTE: *Figures include reported income from local, state and federal sources. Chicago is not included because officials there were unable to verify data for this time period.*

In some of the communities we studied, including Philadelphia, local funding for libraries fell more sharply than the overall city or county spending, as local officials tried to retain funding for services they deemed more essential. In choosing which agency budgets to trim, the *Charlotte Observer* reported that county commissioners there "ranked [library] service behind other areas like money for education, mental illness programs, efforts to prevent abuse and neglect, and paying off construction debt."[12]

Branch Closures: A Hard Sell

Six systems proposed eliminating branches in the wake of the recession—Boston, Charlotte, Detroit, Philadelphia, Phoenix and Pittsburgh. In all but Charlotte and Detroit, public protest stopped these plans.

In 2009, the Pittsburgh library board argued, as officials in Philadelphia had done a year earlier, that the system had more branches than needed. After protests erupted, politicians came up with stop-gap funding, and the library settled for reduced hours as it reassessed its long-term financial outlook.

In Boston, the library board's vote in 2010 to close four branches was met with picketing, candle-light vigils, and a threat by state legislators to cut off all state library aid. Residents called Mayor Thomas Menino a hypocrite for billing himself "the education mayor" and then downsizing the Boston Public Library.[13] City and state lawmakers came through with emergency funding to prevent the closures.

In Phoenix, a city of 1.4 million people served by just 16 libraries, officials proposed closing six of those branches in 2010. The announced closings, along with proposed cuts to police, brought thousands of citizens to community budget hearings. To prevent the cuts, the city council enacted a temporary tax on food purchases and secured wage and benefit reductions from city workers. All 16 locations remained open.

The Charlotte Mecklenburg system lost 40 percent of its county operating support at the end of Fiscal 2010. The initial response from library trustees was to close more than half of the system's 24 branches. The final plan closed four branches and cut hours by 53 percent across the system.

The Detroit Public Library, after laying off 80 employees (19 percent of its staff) in March 2011, proposed eliminating six of its 23 branches. Ultimately, only three were closed. And continued public pressure drove officials to reopen two of them early in 2012, albeit with reduced hours.

Fewer Staff, Fewer Hours

In almost every library system studied, there have been significant reductions in staff and hours. All but one system reduced the number of full-time employees. (See Figure 11.)

FIGURE 11   CHANGE IN FULL-TIME-EQUIVALENT POSITIONS AT LIBRARIES: 2008-2010

System	Change
ATLANTA	9%
DETROIT	-1%
SAN FRANCISCO	-2%
SEATTLE	-3%
COLUMBUS	-6%
PITTSBURGH	-6%
QUEENS	-7%
BOSTON	-9%
BALTIMORE	-10%
BROOKLYN	-12%
PHILADELPHIA	-14%
CHICAGO	-24%
LOS ANGELES	-25%
PHOENIX	-25%
CHARLOTTE	-34%
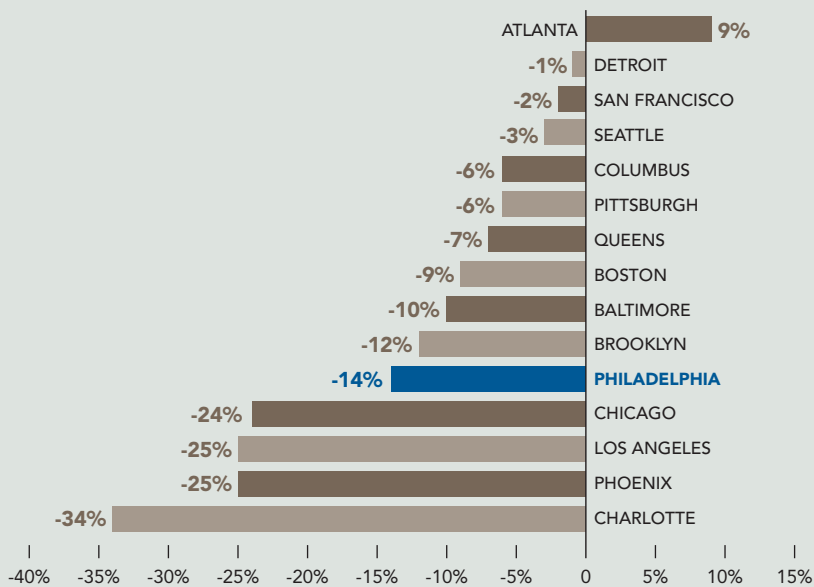
SOURCES: *Public Library Data Service (PLDS), Public Libraries Survey, and individual systems.*

NOTE: *Analysis is based on 2008 numbers from PLDS, which includes unfilled positions if a search for a new employee was underway, and 2010 numbers from our survey, which reflect filled positions at the end of the fiscal year. For Los Angeles, the calculation is based on total budgeted positions.*

Most of the reductions came through attrition. Pittsburgh, Brooklyn and Los Angeles offered early-retirement incentives. Nearly a dozen systems instituted hiring freezes. In several cities, there were layoffs.

In January 2009, the Free Library of Philadelphia laid off 41 employees. All but eight were able to transfer to positions in other city departments. An additional 70 open positions were eliminated or frozen. In the spring of 2010, Boston laid off 31 people.

With smaller staffs, libraries generally are unable to stay open as long as they did before. Twelve of the systems studied reduced weekly hours. (See Figure 12.) Phoenix cut 25 percent of staff and 30 percent of overall library hours in a single year.

In pruning schedules, officials focused on mornings, when libraries attract the fewest visitors, and evenings and weekends, which can be more expensive to staff. In almost all cases, some hours were restored as city and county budget pictures improved.

In several communities, library officials have sought to recruit volunteers to make up for lost workers. This approach has limitations. Volunteers often cannot be relied on for regular and sustained work schedules. And the need for professional know-how, as well as union rules in some places, limit how much volunteers can do. The Free Library of Philadelphia uses more than 1,700 volunteers annually. Among other tasks, they answer computer questions, help seniors, and lead English-language discussion groups for immigrants.

FIGURE 12   CHANGE IN LIBRARIES' AVERAGE WEEKLY HOURS: 2008-2010

—UNCHANGED—	PITTSBURGH
—UNCHANGED—	DETROIT
<-1%	QUEENS
<-1%	ATLANTA
-1%	BALTIMORE
-2%	CHARLOTTE
-3%	BOSTON
-5%	BROOKLYN
-12%	**PHILADELPHIA**
-13%	SEATTLE
-16%	LOS ANGELES
-17%	COLUMBUS
-22%	CHICAGO
-37%	PHOENIX

-40% -35% -30% -25% -20% -15% -10% -5%   0   5%   10%
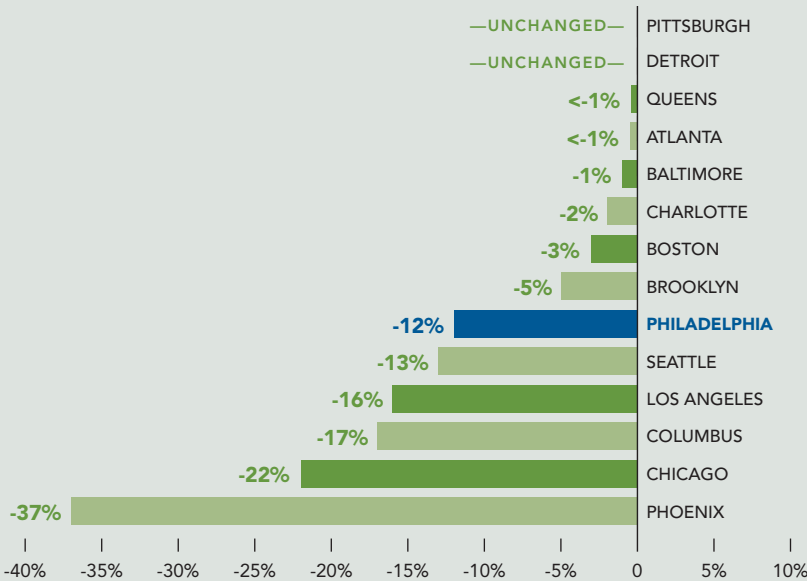
SOURCES: *Public Library Data Service, Public Libraries Survey, and individual systems.*

NOTE: *The San Francisco Public Library is not included in this graphic because multiple branches were closed for renovation during this period.*

Books, Salaries and Furloughs

The libraries in the cities studied took other measures to reduce costs. Chicago and Columbus lowered staff salaries. Seven libraries furloughed staff. Seattle closed the entire system for a week in August of 2009, 2010 and 2011.

Queens, Columbus, and a number of other systems opted not to replace old volumes and to defer the purchase of new books, DVDs, ebooks and other electronic material. Atlanta-Fulton reduced programming and kept spending on new materials to a minimum.

In Philadelphia, spending on materials shrank from $8.6 million in Fiscal 2008 to $4.8 million in Fiscal 2011, a reduction of 44 percent. "We are dealing with limited budgets, trying to anticipate demand, trying to be cost-effective," said Anne Silvers Lee, chief of the Materials Management division at the Free Library. For the most part, the cuts have affected all types of library materials, including books, DVDs and electronic resources. That said, the library has set aside money so that every branch will have needed materials for certain target groups including job seekers and pre-kindergarten children. The library has also allocated funds to purchase ebooks and downloadable music, for a target group the library calls the "digitally savvy."

PRIVATIZING LIBRARIES

In an effort to reduce costs, more than a dozen public library systems in the U.S. have gone private in the past 15 years. Privatization generally involves hiring a for-profit company to manage a library or system. Riverside County, California, was the first community to contract out all library operations, doing so in 1997.

Nearly all of the privatized systems work with the same provider, Library Systems and Services, LLC (LSSI).[14] Executives at LSSI say that their management has produced higher library usage with fewer staff, increased donations, and operational savings. In some places, initial opposition to privatization appears to have dwindled; in other places, officials have decided not to renew LSSI's contracts.[15]

The American Library Association opposes "the shifting of policy making and management oversight of library services from the public sector to the private for-profit sector."[16] There has been no talk of privatizing the Free Library of Philadelphia.

Three Cities Vote for Library Funding

A handful of systems have worked actively to secure new funding streams. In the past several years, voters in Columbus, Los Angeles and Pittsburgh have approved ballot measures that produced money for their libraries.

In Ohio, where libraries are funded by voter-approved property-tax levies that must be renewed periodically, leaders of the Columbus Metropolitan Library enlisted the business and university community in 2010 to rally support to raise the library tax rate for the first time in 24 years—despite the poor economy. The increase was designed to make up for the phasing out of tax subsidies, a decrease in state funding, and other revenue declines. The higher tax, which the voters approved by a ratio of nearly 2-to-1, produced about $31 million, more than making up for lost revenues.

In Los Angeles, in the spring of 2011, voters approved a measure that will dedicate a portion of the city's property tax revenues to library support. The measure, which was backed by 63 percent of the voters, will eventually produce an additional $50 million per year in funding. The measure was placed on the ballot in response to a proposal by city government to cut library spending by 30 percent to help balance the city budget. In the end, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and all 15 council members supported it.

In Pittsburgh, in the fall of 2011, voters approved a new property tax levy that will provide about $3.25 million in additional funding each year for the library. As in Los Angeles, the ballot question, which was approved by 72 percent of the voters, was in response to cuts in local funding that threatened branch closures.[17]

Patrick Dowd, a Pittsburgh city councilman and library board member, was an early proponent of the levy, even though many policy makers told him it had no chance of passage. "I felt that [the library board and many elected officials] had a flawed understanding of the role of the library in the community," Dowd said. "There is a fundamental love of this institution because you have people who work in the neighborhood and are connected to people who go into the branch. The librarians are the people who get you books, find a safe space for your kids. You know them. You just don't have that kind of connection with your garbage collector."

Officials in Seattle are considering putting a similar measure before voters in 2012, in hopes of raising $10 million to $20 million to support core library services.

Issues Facing Philadelphia's Library: Facilities, Staffing and Governance

Over the past century, and particularly in the last decade, the way people use libraries has changed dramatically, reflecting the changes in urban life. The Free Library of Philadelphia has taken significant steps to adapt. But it is struggling to keep up.

THE BRANCHES

The Free Library has 49 small branches serving specific neighborhoods. (See Figure 13.) Several of the branches are in need of maintenance or improvement. Most lack sufficient computers to keep up with public demand. A few are underutilized.

Buildings and Technology

In the 1990s, the Free Library raised $175 million to improve the branches. The capital campaign, called Changing Lives, included $3.8 million from The Pew Charitable Trusts. "When I started [as director] the branches were in deplorable condition—HVAC, roofs and asbestos, those were the issues," said former Free Library Director Elliot Shelkrot. "It was shameful the shape the branches were in. I'd be sickened when I went to meetings at some of the branches."

Thanks to that campaign, every branch in the system was repaired and got public-access computers and Internet service. Shelkrot said: "We thought we needed two or three computers in each branch when we started [the renovations], but at the end we knew we needed five or six and separate interfaces for children." Today, each branch has at least four computers for adults with others for children, as well as free wireless access and public printers.

Among the 15 library systems studied, Philadelphia ranks 11th in the number of public-access library computers per capita; of the cities with higher per capita numbers, all except Chicago are less populous than Philadelphia. In almost every Free Library branch, there are times during the day when patrons must wait for a computer to free up. Most of the systems with higher ratios serve significantly smaller populations. (See Figure 14.)

And although the branches are in much better physical condition than they were before the Changing Lives campaign, they still face serious capital issues. "We have a system with a lot of aging infrastructure, particularly our [16] historic Carnegie branches," said Free Library Director Siobhan Reardon. Boiler breakdowns, roof leaks, and water damage are constant issues. Reardon and several Free Library board members expressed concern that the library's approximately $1 million budget for repairs is insufficient for such a large and old system. Said Reardon: "We have to focus on the real emergencies. As a result, some needed upkeep goes undone. Because we can't take care of things upfront, we end up with chronic problems down the line."

FIGURE 13   FREE LIBRARY OF PHILADELPHIA BRANCHES AND HOT SPOTS

BUSTLETON •

KATHERINE
DREXEL •

CHESTNUT HILL •   • WADSWORTH   FOX CHASE •   • WELSH ROAD

• WEST OAK LANE

• ANDORRA   • TORRESDALE

LOVETT •   • OAK LANE   • NE REGIONAL

DAVID COHEN •   LAWNCREST •

ROXBOROUGH •   • BUSHROD   • HOLMESBURG

NW REGIONAL •   • GREATER OLNEY

LOGAN •   • TACONY

• WYOMING

FALLS OF SCHUYLKILL •   • FRANKFORD

• NICETOWN

WYNNEFIELD •   WIDENER •   • MARRERO   McPHERSON SQUARE

KENSINGTON •   • RICHMOND

OVERBROOK   CECIL B. MOORE •

PARK •

HADDINGTON •   RODRIGUEZ •   • FISHTOWN

HAVERFORD •   DURHAM •

WEST REGIONAL •   • PARKWAY CENTRAL

WALNUT ST. WEST •   • INDEPENDENCE

BLANCHE NIXON •   PHILA. CITY INSTITUTE •   BLIND/PHYSICALLY HANDICAPPED

KINGSESSING •   QUEEN MEMORIAL •   • SANTORE

SOUTH PHILA. •

PASCHALVILLE •   DONATUCCI •   • WHITMAN

FUMO
FAMILY

EASTWICK •

• Library Branch

Half-mile Radius

Hot Spot Computer Lab

MILES
0   ½   1

SOURCE: *Free Library of Philadelphia*

FIGURE 14   LIBRARY COMPUTERS PER 10,000 RESIDENTS: 2010

SEATTLE	18.9
COLUMBUS	13.1
CHARLOTTE	12.0
BALTIMORE	11.4
PITTSBURGH	9.4
SAN FRANCISCO	9.2
DETROIT	8.5
BOSTON	8.4
ATLANTA	7.1
CHICAGO	6.5
PHILADELPHIA	6.1
LOS ANGELES	5.9
QUEENS	5.6
BROOKLYN	3.8
PHOENIX	3.5

0   2   4   6   8   10   12   14   16   18   20
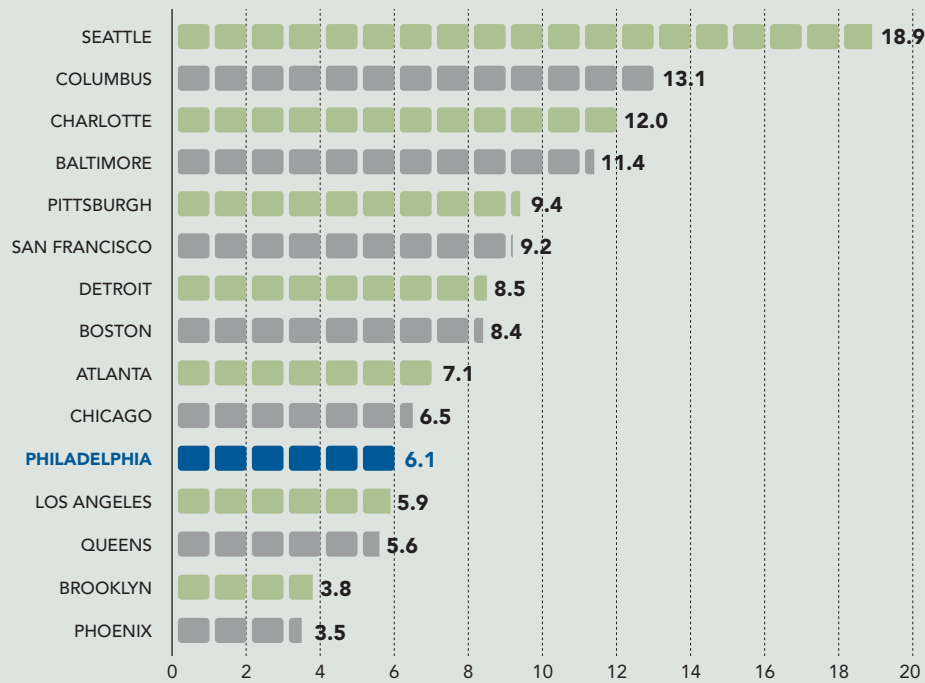
SOURCE: *Individual library systems and the 2010 U. S. Census.*

Branch Utilization

Over the past three years, the Bustleton, Independence and Philadelphia City Institute branches have consistently been among the top performers in visits, circulation and program attendance.[18]

"Location, location, location" can explain much of their popularity, according to Joseph Benford, who is chief of the Free Library's Extensions division. The Independence branch, at Seventh and Market Streets, is in the middle of the Center City business district, making it popular with people who work in the area. The Philadelphia City Institute branch is on Rittenhouse Square, attracting residents, workers, and those using the park. The Bustleton branch in the city's Far Northeast sits next to a high school and two blocks from an elementary school; it has excellent relationships with both.

In addition, both Independence and Bustleton serve large immigrant communities and house foreign language collections for them. Thirteen percent of circulation at the Independence branch involves Chinese-language material. At Bustleton, 16 percent of circulation involves Russian-language material. The gay and lesbian collection at the Independence branch also is a draw, according to Benford.
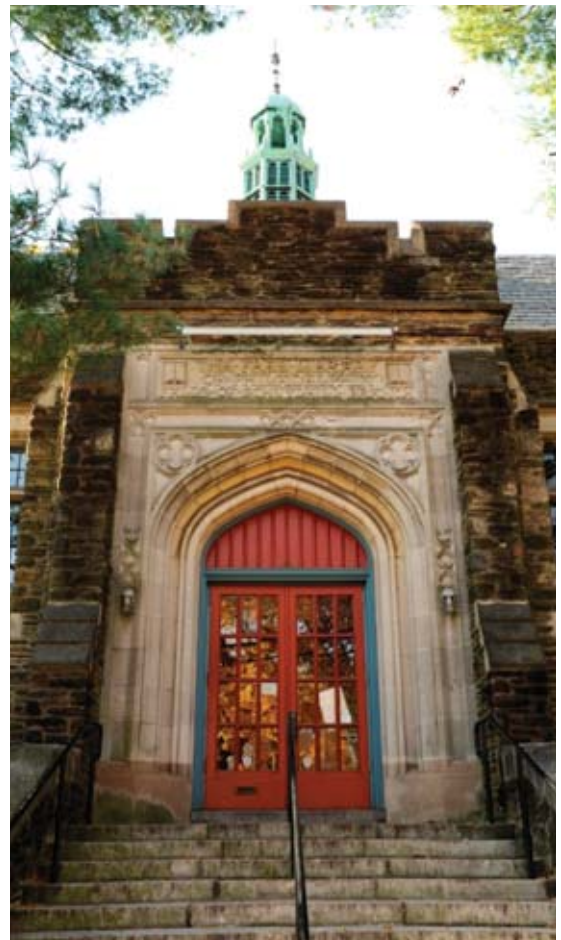
LIBRARIES AND SCHOOLS

For many Philadelphia public schoolchildren, the Free Library is the only library they have. Fewer than half of Philadelphia's public schools have libraries on site. Of those, fewer than 60 percent are staffed by librarians or library assistants, according to Lois McGee of the School District's Office of Teaching and Learning. Some school libraries are little more than closets or carts, that, in several cases, are overseen by volunteers.

The situation is similar in Atlanta, Chicago, Columbus, Los Angeles, New York and Pittsburgh, cities in which public schools are not required to have libraries.

To provide schoolchildren greater access to library services, the New York Public Library, which serves the Bronx, Manhattan and Staten Island, recently piloted a program in which students can reserve books online and have them delivered and picked up at school. Teachers can borrow entire sets of books— enough for everyone in a class.

In Chicago, each branch partners with a nearby school. According to Roberta Webb, a district chief for the Chicago Public Library, all librarians are required to meet with the principal of each school they serve at the beginning of the academic year. During the year, librarians go to the schools on a regular basis, leading storytimes and teaching research skills. Likewise, school groups often make field trips to the library.

Philadelphia's branch librarians also try to connect with local schools, but low staffing levels make it hard.

On the flip side, the Haddington, Eastwick and Charles Durham branches had the fewest visits and the lowest levels of circulation and program attendance. Location plays a role here, too. None of these sits near a major commercial corridor or job center. In addition, Haddington (in West Philadelphia) and Eastwick (in Southwest Philadelphia) have suffered from staffing issues in the past several years. Recently both were assigned new permanent branch heads and children's librarians, and Benford predicts that their popularity will increase as a result.

One challenge for Durham, which is located in West Philadelphia's Mantua neighborhood, is its size. It is the second smallest branch in the system, larger only than Fishtown. According to Benford, this means that "there simply isn't enough space at Durham to do a lot of programming." Compounding the problem, the branch shares its modest meeting room with the recreation center next door. As a result, the library has fewer hours to hold programs than other branches.

Philadelphia has 3.5 libraries per 100,000 residents. As shown in Figure 15, that is just above the median for the 15 communities studied. All of the systems with higher numbers serve significantly smaller populations than Philadelphia. The communities with the fewest branches per capita, Phoenix, Los Angeles and Charlotte, are more spread-out and more automobile-dependent.

Even with 52 neighborhood branches, "We know not everyone has access to library services," said Jennifer Donsky of the Free Library's Office of Public Service Support. Several cities, including San Francisco, Los Angeles and Chicago, have added branches in recent years.

FIGURE 15   LIBRARY BRANCHES PER 100,000 RESIDENTS: 2011

City	Branches per 100,000
SEATTLE	4.4
BOSTON	4.4
PITTSBURGH	4.1
ATLANTA	3.6
SAN FRANCISCO	3.5
PHILADELPHIA	3.5
BALTIMORE	3.4
DETROIT	3.4
CHICAGO	2.9
QUEENS	2.7
COLUMBUS	2.5
BROOKLYN	2.4
CHARLOTTE	2.2
LOS ANGELES	1.9
PHOENIX	1.1
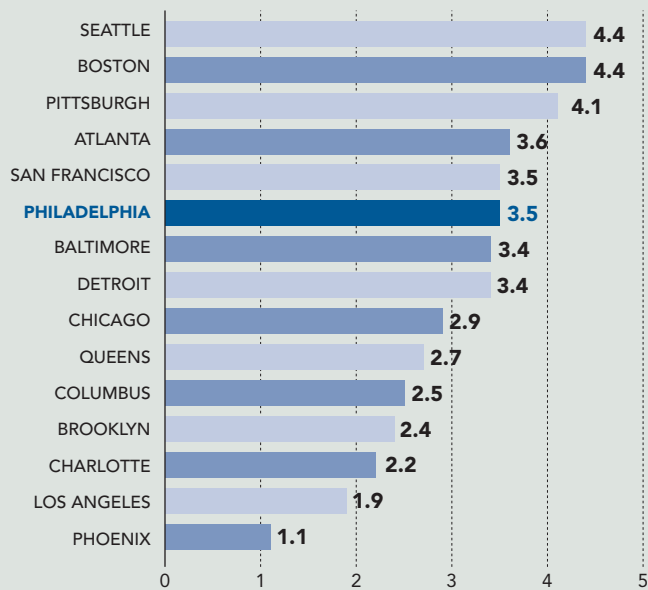
SOURCES: *Individual library systems and the 2010 U. S. Census.*

NOTE: *Calculations include the main library as well as neighborhood and regional branches. Philadelphia's Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped is not included.*

Hot Spots

Philadelphia has not opened a new branch since the Independence branch in 2001. In the current city budget climate, opening new facilities is not on the table. But the Free Library has come up with a way to expand the library's reach into previously underserved neighborhoods without the cost or permanence of a branch. The program is called "hot spots."

Funded by the Knight Foundation and the federal Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP), the six hot spots are library-staffed computer labs inside facilities owned or operated by community organizations. They are located in areas where few people have library cards, and rates of Internet access are low.

Donna Frisby-Greenwood, Philadelphia program director for Knight, explained the rationale: "If you're low-literate, you're not likely to go to the library. But you trust your church and your community center. So why not set up [library] outposts in those places that you trust and frequent?"

Library hot spots are part of the Freedom Rings Partnership, a consortium of Philadelphia community organizations led by the city's Office of Innovation and Technology; the partnership includes the Free Library and the city's recreation centers. With BTOP funding, it is establishing 77 public-access computer centers throughout the city.

What makes the hot spots distinctive is that they are, in some ways, mini-libraries. All the computers open to the library home page. The library's collections of databases and electronic materials are available to hot-spot users even if they do not have library cards. And each hot spot contains a small collection of reference books. All hot spots are staffed by part-time computing assistants employed through the Free Library Foundation and have printers patrons can use.

Use of the hot spots has been high, due in part to outreach by library staff. "There was a flier at the shelter where I stay," reported one hot-spot user. Said another: "I went to the office across the street for help printing out a job application, and they told me I could come over here." There are plans for a hot-spot van outfitted with tablet computers and laptops to travel the city in 2012.

CYBER NAVIGATORS

In Philadelphia and elsewhere, providing computer assistance to individuals with little computer know-how has become a major part of a library's job.

Several library systems around the country, including Brooklyn, Chicago, Queens and Seattle, have addressed this issue by hiring staff trained and dedicated to helping patrons use computers. In Chicago, these "cyber navigators" are working in almost every branch.

"I spend a lot of time explaining the [web] address bar," said Jamie Thompson, a new cyber navigator at Chicago's Near North branch. "I work with people who have spent a lot of time in jail or are homeless. … What has struck me is how people need the computer to get services, to get everything, even getting an appointment with immigration services. You can't call, you have to do it online. That was a big shock to me."

Philadelphia's system has its own computing assistants. They are deployed in the six hot spots. In addition, eight branches have dedicated computer labs where part-time staff teach classes and provide general technical help to patrons for an average of 17 hours a week.

PARKWAY CENTRAL

The Central Library on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, known as Parkway Central, is a grand, block-long, Beaux Arts building. Built during the 1920s, the structure, four stories tall and fashioned out of stone, was designed for patrons coming to take out books, conduct research, or enjoy lunch overlooking the city's cultural boulevard. Stacks walled off from the public took up much of the building. A large, imposing entryway contained a reference desk. Off to one side was a long, wide hallway with card catalogues.

Today, most of the library's 320,000 square feet of floor space remains off limits to the public, taken up with stacks and administrative offices. What public space there is tends to be cold and ill-suited to current needs. Public-access computers fill hallways on the second floor. A children's area in the basement is often empty, attracting far fewer patrons than the bustling children's sections at the branch and regional libraries. In the Philadelphia Research Initative survey, four out of five Philadelphia library users said they rely primarily on branch or regional libraries rather than Parkway Central.

Still, Parkway Central gets a lot of use. The building's 150 public-access computers—far more than in any other library in the system—logged 187,322 computer sessions in 2010. That represents 15 percent of the total computer sessions in the entire Free Library system. Appearances by well-known authors frequently sell out Central's 375-seat auditorium. Some events are so popular that the library sells tickets to a simulcast at the Moore College of Art across Logan Circle. For these reasons and others, there were 957,874 visits to Parkway Central in 2010, 17 percent of the total visits to the Free Library system.

Central Libraries in Other Cities

Compared to a number of other large, urban library systems, Philadelphia has made relatively few changes to its central facility, which still looks much as it did 20 years ago. Over that period, Seattle, Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles have built new facilities that allow them to better address the changing ways that patrons use libraries. Baltimore, Pittsburgh and Queens have radically reconfigured existing spaces.

These new designs have more computer areas. And they have open, flexible spaces that can be turned into meeting rooms, health centers or exhibition areas, depending on the wants and needs of the community.

Seattle's nine-story, glass central library opened in 2004 in the heart of downtown. Its third floor houses 400 public-access computers and a large bank of printers. Most days, all of the computers are in use. A 250-seat auditorium sits across from the first-floor entrance, with just a curtain separating it from the entryway. When there is no program, the curtain opens, allowing patrons to use the space for reading or meetings. A language section on the first floor offers daily computer classes in Russian, Spanish, Chinese and two African languages: Amharic and Oromo. This is in addition to English as a Second Language classes and an adult-literacy book collection. The recipient of many architectural awards for its innovative and green design, the Seattle Central Library has become a tourist destination known for its view of the waterfront.

Pittsburgh, rather than start from scratch, redesigned its grand, 1880s-era main library. The entrance area, like that of Philadelphia's Parkway Central, was once home only to a large free-standing reference desk. Now the space is filled with couches, chairs and a large cafe. Periodicals are a little farther back on the first floor in an area that has been transformed into an indoor bamboo garden. Off to the side sits the teen center behind a sound-proof glass door. The center includes a large flat-screen television and couches where teens can play video games and watch movies at designated times. Bookshelves all around are filled with teen-interest books. On most days after school, the small space is packed.

Parkway Central's Scaled-Back Plans for a Makeover

In 2003, the Free Library initiated an architectural competition for a modern extension. The winning design, by Canadian Moshe Safdie, called for a 160,000-square-foot, glass-covered addition to the rear of the building. Components included a 600-seat auditorium, children's library, teen center, cafe, computer area, and a large space for public seating. The existing building would have remained relatively untouched.

From the beginning, some critics questioned the scale of the project. Then-City Councilman Frank DiCicco said that the Free Library was attempting to build "the Taj Mahal at the expense of neighborhood libraries."[19] By 2008, the cost of the project had grown to $175 million, far more than the library had raised. With the system's operating budget declining, the project became a harder sell. Still, library management remained committed to it.

Since then, library officials have shifted some of their focus to renovating the existing structure. The first phase of the work began in June 2011 at a cost of $5 million. It involved improvements to the exterior, restoration of the main vestibule, and renovation of the first-floor Philbrick Popular Library that serves, in effect, as a branch for the neighborhood. The next phase, slated to start in mid-2012, includes redoing the fourth-floor meeting and event space, modernizing the stacks system, expanding the exhibition space in the rare book department, building a new common space on the first floor, and installing a new lobby desk. The estimated cost is $39 million.

A scaled-back addition is planned, but details remain under wraps.

One possible component of Parkway Central's future that may be difficult to achieve is the removal of unused items to free up space. Compared to other cities, the Free Library must go through a lengthy process to take books off the shelves—a process called weeding. In every system, librarians periodically identify volumes that have not circulated for years. In Chicago, Queens, Pittsburgh and elsewhere, those books, if they do not have special relevance, are given to vendors who sell them, often to other library systems. Shelf space is freed up, and part of the profit is returned to the library.

In Philadelphia, however, books in the Free Library system are city property and must first be offered to other city agencies at no charge. This takes at least a week. If there are no takers, the books are then offered to the public for 25 cents apiece. After a month, they become free. Often it takes months before weeded books are claimed.

Special Collections

As the Free Library of Philadelphia moves ahead with its renovation and expansion plans, one key topic is the fate of the library's special collections—both how to maintain them and whether to do so. Of all the libraries surveyed for this report, only Philadelphia and Boston have extensive special collections. And Parkway Central has a lot of them.

One of the world's most famous medieval illuminated manuscripts, the Lewis Psalter, is housed on the third floor. Near it is a large collection of Charles Dickens first editions, a manuscript of a book he wrote for his children, and his stuffed pet raven. Down the hall, drawers house ancient cuneiform tablets from the Middle East, one of the earliest known forms of writing. Close by are early Pennsylvania documents, written in German, and first editions on the sport of fishing.

The mezzanine level houses the largest collection of historic automobile manuals and advertisements outside of Detroit. On the first and second floors are rare sheet music, antique instruments, historic recordings of orchestral music, old photographs of Philadelphia, and prints by Albrecht Dürer, Rembrandt, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein and William Blake.

Most of these collections were given by wealthy Philadelphians to the Free Library in the hope of making them accessible to the general public. Today, they take up a lot of space but get few visitors. According to Janine Pollock, head of the Rare Book Department, most "people who come [to Parkway Central] don't know about [any of] this, and yet we're known worldwide." The collections are hidden from public view, tucked behind large reference desks or up on the third floor where library patrons seldom venture.

The special collections face two additional challenges: many objects are not catalogued, so researchers have difficulty finding them, and several of the special collections are not being adequately protected from light, humidity and human touch. Some librarians report items rotting and having to be thrown out. "We're in a packed attic that's not climate controlled," said Kim Bravo, who heads the automobile reference collection. "I am terribly concerned for the material."

Renovation plans call for creating better conditions for preserving these items. It is unclear, however, whether there will be room for all of them or if some collections might be sold or removed from the collection in order to free up space for the public.

Free Library Board member Peter Benoliel said that it is time for him and his colleagues to ask themselves some tough questions: "Is this collection the right collection for us? Is there some other place that might be more appropriate? ... If we didn't have to maintain them and curate them and exhibit them, that would be a loss to our institution, but would it allow us to move forward in a higher priority direction?"

At the Free Library, the process of removing an item from a collection, known as deaccessioning, comes with a lot of rules. To be eligible for removal, an item must meet one of nine criteria such as not fitting into the collection's priorities or lacking proper storage conditions. If the item fits these criteria, two other issues arise. First, if the item was part of a bequest, there may be issues surrounding the donor's intent. Second is the question of ownership: whether the item belongs to the Free Library itself or the Free Library Foundation. If the item belongs to the Foundation, the library can lend, donate or sell it. If it is city property, the city solicitor determines what to do with it. In either case, if the item is sold, the proceeds of the sale are to be used whenever possible to maintain the library's special collections.[20]

In early 2012, the library was exploring the possibility of selling some items from its collections, including some Warhol prints.

STAFF

Much as Parkway Central is set up structurally for an earlier age of library use, so is the staff. The current staffing configuration, which is now under review, emphasizes Parkway Central's specialized reference librarians, sometimes at the expense of staffing the branches. "Our staffing model predates the technology revolution," said Siobhan Reardon. "We need to redeploy into a more nimble, flatter organization that is more outwardly and customer-service focused."

Parkway Central is organized into 20 separate reference desks and departments. Some have unique collections or missions, such as the rare book department or senior services. Others are general topic areas: art, business and science, education and religion, social sciences and history, and literature. This structure was common for libraries prior to the Internet age. No one librarian could be expected to field every type of research and reference question to come through the door. As a result, librarians acquired in-depth knowledge of particular fields.

The development of online search tools and databases has diminished the need for this kind of structure. "Our number of reference questions is greatly reduced from how it used to be," said Donald Root, chief of Central Public Services. "Most students, and most everyone, are starting their research online before coming to us. At this point, we get a random assortment of reference questions that could be answered by almost any reference desk."

This reference-desk structure uses a lot of staff. Each desk or department has a staff of at least six, including two librarian supervisors (one for overseeing the collection, another for overseeing scheduling); two or more librarians to staff the desk; and two or more assistants to process and shelve material.

In contrast, many neighborhood branches operate with lean crews. Each branch is assigned a minimum of five employees: one supervising librarian who runs the branch, an additional librarian, two library assistants, and one person who serves as both custodian and security guard.

Several large library systems have redesigned their central staffing models to better accommodate current patron needs.

In Pittsburgh, officials consolidated reference desks at the main library, reducing professional staff by a third. In Brooklyn, the library introduced online and kiosk fine-payment options and outsourced some tasks. According to Richard Reyes-Gavilan, Brooklyn's chief librarian, these and other changes allowed the system to redeploy staff and increase hours at 16 branches from five to six days a week.[21]

Officials at the Free Library of Philadelphia have hired a consultant to review the current staffing structure at Parkway Central and make recommendations. "I would like to consolidate more of the reference desks," said Root. "It would mean fewer service points for us to cover, and it would be more convenient for the patrons to go to just one or two places for the information that they need."

GOVERNANCE

The Free Library of Philadelphia has a confusing governance structure. The result is an organization in which many people inside it are unclear as to who has authority over what, rendering decision-making cumbersome.

It is not a standard city agency, as in Chicago, where the library director reports to the mayor. Nor is it an independent nonprofit that owns its own buildings and receives a lump appropriation from local government, like the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.

Rather, the Free Library is a strange sort of hybrid made up of two organizations: an independent city agency managed by its own governing board and a separate non-profit organization, the Free Library of Philadelphia Foundation. The workings of this hybrid can get pretty complicated.

As a city agency, the Free Library gets the majority of its funding from the city's general fund. Most of the library buildings belong to the city and could, in theory, be put to any public use. Library books are city property. Most library staff members, including the librarians and clerks, are city civil service employees represented by a labor union. And City Council must approve the library budget.

The foundation, which exists solely to raise money for the library, is a nonprofit with its own board and staff. The funds it raises can be used for the library's programming, capital projects and special collections. They cannot, however, be used for items covered by the city, such as salaries.

The library and foundation boards have different selection processes. For the library board, half of all members are chosen by the mayor and half by the board members themselves. The foundation board is entirely self-perpetuating and must include at least eight members of the library board. The two boards appoint the library director, who is accountable to both groups and also must operate within the city's chain of command.

There are historic reasons for this arrangement. According to Free Library Board Chairman Robert Heim, having an independent governing board resulted from a judgment made in the early 20th century; library advocates wanted some distance from politicians who might want to ban or promote some books or use neighborhood libraries as political footballs in local squabbles. The establishment of a separate foundation allowed the library to accept and manage private donations.

This arrangement has pluses and minuses. On the one hand, it enables the library to raise money on its own. To some degree, it insulates the library director from the political process, allowing more continuous and independent leadership; Elliot Shelkrot ran the library from 1987 to 2007, during three different mayoral administrations.

On the other hand, lines of authority get blurry. The Free Library Board is charged with overseeing the operations and management of the institution.[22] But the city has the power of the purse and owns many of the library's assets. City approval is required for closing branches.

"The library is fundamentally a city-operated department with a dual governance structure," said Michael DiBerardinis, deputy mayor for Environmental and Community Resources, who oversees the library for Mayor Nutter. But, he added, "The trustees hire the executive director, and this fact accounts in a significant way for the rather complex governance structure."

In 2008, it was Nutter, not the library board, who announced the controversial plan to close 11 branches, although the board had approved it.

Said one long-time board member, "I can't tell you how many times in my years on the board that we have had the discussion: Do we report to the mayor or not?" Legally, the board does not. But in reality, it does.

Delineating the role of the Free Library Foundation is equally tricky. The foundation is charged with maintaining the bequests of books and artifacts that have been made to it. But it is not always clear which materials belong to the foundation and which to the Library. In addition, library board members also help with fundraising, and both boards appoint members to the library's special collection and government affairs committees. Reflecting on the two-board structure, another foundation board member said, "I don't like the two-board system. It's unwieldy. It doesn't create community or unity. It creates duplication, takes up inordinate staff time, and confuses the public."

Other large library systems have reexamined their governing structures in recent years.

In Brooklyn, the library, a nonprofit that gets a block grant from New York City, eliminated its separate foundation; the change has not hurt private fundraising, which remains strong.

In Charlotte, where the library is a nonprofit that gets a block grant from Mecklenburg County, library officials wondered whether big cuts to the library budget were due in part to a poor relationship between the library board and the county government. As a result, a joint library-county task force recommended that library management establish a closer working relationship with county officials and, if necessary, explore converting the library into a county agency.[23]

A LIBRARY IN A CITY WITH A HIGH ILLITERACY RATE

The Free Library's mission statement includes a commitment to advancing literacy.

An estimated 22 percent of Philadelphia adults lack basic literacy skills.[24] By some calculations, more than half of city residents age 16 and older are "low-literate," meaning that their reading, writing and quantitative abilities do not qualify them for many of today's jobs.[25]

Even so, the Free Library's work in adult-literacy is relatively modest: The library provides learning materials and meeting space for adult education classes, although many of those classes have been cut along with branch hours. In addition, the library houses the offices of the Mayor's Commission on Literacy.

Some big urban library systems have taken a more active role in addressing adult literacy. The Brooklyn Public Library operates five adult-literacy centers that serve about 700 people annually and are staffed by adult-education professionals who train and oversee volunteers. Adults with reading levels at eighth grade or below are the focus, and tailored programs are available for younger adults and non-native English speakers. The centers also offer health, workplace and technology-literacy workshops.

In Queens, seven adult learning centers draw about 1,500 literacy students a year, in addition to almost 3,000 participants in English for Speakers of Other Languages programs. Every center features tutor-training sessions and instruction materials; volunteer-led groups for basic reading and writing skills; pre-GED classes; computer labs with specialized software; referrals to other education programs; and special activities like financial-literacy workshops and civics education.

The centers in both Brooklyn and Queens operate on a mix of general city funds and grants, including more than $50 million in federal workforce development funds. ◦

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The Future of The Free Library:
Challenges and Options

Urban libraries across the country face two fundamental challenges. One is to find sustainable funding, the other to meet changing patron demands stemming from the changes in urban America. "In the next three years, I expect that operating funds will continue to be limited, and we will continue to try to do more with less," said Robert Heim, Free Library of Philadelphia board chairman. "One of the questions looming for the longer term is: What will be the sources of funds available to this library and how will we expend those funds?"

Many libraries, including the Free Library of Philadelphia, have begun planning for these challenges. Only a few, however, appear on their way to meeting them. Philadelphia has some special challenges of its own, having to do with governance, its branches and its central library.

During the last two years, the boards and staffs of the Free Library and the Free Library Foundation engaged in a strategic planning process. Through a series of unevenly attended workshops, participants examined different scenarios for the long term: What would or should the Free Library look like in a city with a worsening economy versus an improving economy? And in a landscape of rapid technological change versus one in which the pace of change slowed?

A cornerstone of the plan, which was completed in early 2012, is a new mission statement: "To advance literacy, guide learning and inspire curiosity." This represents a more expansive notion of a library than the previous mission statement, which focused on providing a collection of information, knowledge and artistic expression.

The proposed plan to support the new mission revolves around six broad themes:

- a commitment to new technology

- a redesign of the library Web site to increase virtual access to library resources

- a reorganization of staff to increase accountability for discrete initiatives

- greater branch specialization to respond to specific community needs

- a focus on intra-staff communication and staff training

- increased marketing and promotion of library services

The document does not address funding challenges, nor does it target budget levels. Though the initial outline for the strategic planning process called for a reexamination of the two-board governing structure, that issue was not taken up in depth; the strategic plan retains the status quo. And while the plan calls for new initiatives in literacy services, programming for new Americans, and small business support, it does not say whether any of the library's current functions need to be phased out.

Other libraries have addressed the future in more specific ways.

The Boston Public Library recently undertook its own two-year, board-led strategic planning process.[26] The Boston plan, which emerged after the library held several large public and staff forums, endorses broad themes and recommends an improved library Web site and increased branch specialization. It also calls for additional research into such specific topics as exploration of new funding sources, capital improvement needs, workflow efficiencies, and the weeding of collections.

In Charlotte, the county and the library convened a high-profile task force to examine library funding. Finding that the library was underfunded compared with its counterparts, the task force recommended a modest increase in annual county funding—which was enacted by Mecklenburg County for Fiscal 2012. The task force also recommended eliminating services that did not reflect the library's core mission of providing access to information. These services included an annual literacy festival and the library's job-help center.

In Pittsburgh, a library task force assessed 20 funding strategies and recommended six of them, including launching a new endowment campaign, cultivating active community support, and proposing state and local tax incentives for library contributions. The core recommendation was a public referendum to raise property taxes in support of the library. With the success of the ballot measure, the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh is now planning for a more ambitious future.

Here are some of the challenges facing the Free Library of Philadelphia and the options it might pursue—based on the experience of some of the more popular and innovative urban public libraries that we studied.

SIMPLIFYING THE GOVERNING STRUCTURE

Decision-making is cumbersome for the Free Library under the current governing system: Who has ultimate authority over various topics is open for debate, and board members are unclear of their role.

In the last year, Library Board Chairman Heim and Deputy Mayor DiBerardinis have worked to clarify the relationship between the library and the city, establishing protocols for communication and delineating roles and responsibilities more clearly.

Major issues remain, especially after the library's strategic plan did not recommend any significant changes to the governance status quo. Would the library be better served with a closer connection to the city or with greater independence? Would a merger of the Free Library and the Free Library Foundation, eliminating the two-board structure, give the new entity greater control over the library's holdings?

Reaching a consensus on these questions will not be easy. But they may be worth addressing, considering that library staff and board members alike find the current structure less than optimal and agree that the institution will need to move with greater agility in the future.

PRIORITIZING SERVICES

The Philadelphia Research Initiative's polling found that Philadelphians rely on the Free Library to provide a safe and educational place for children, a quiet space for reading, a source of health information, resources for job seekers, a connection to government services, and access to the Internet.

Moving forward in an age of limited resources, library management will have to make choices, deciding how much to spend on what its patrons want and how much to spend on such functions as the stewardship and maintenance of its special collections.

Other cities have reacted to user demand by allowing individuals longer time on public-access computers, employing dedicated computer assistants, and opening health-information centers.

There is also an opportunity for the library to play a role in filling the largely unmet need for adult-literacy and adult-basic education in Philadelphia. The Free Library's new mission statement makes these functions a priority. Other large, urban libraries like those in New York City and Seattle are doing more on this front.

Regardless of how the Free Library chooses to meet the customer demands of today, it will need to anticipate the demands of the future. One way to do that would be to commission regular patron surveys. Another would be to conduct regular audits of current programming, to see which services are popular and which are not.

REEVALUATING BRANCH HOURS

It is not clear that Philadelphia's five-day-a-week branch hours are distributed in the best possible way.

One issue is weekends. The experiences of other library systems, including Pittsburgh and San Francisco, suggest that increased weekend hours, including Sundays, can do a lot to generate visits and circulation. All neighborhood libraries in Philadelphia are closed on Sundays. Each branch is closed either on Friday or Saturday, with a nearby branch closed the other day.

Another issue is the fact that different branches have different schedules. While intended to give patrons an increased chance of finding an open library, this system also can create confusion, which may discourage patronage.

No one in the library community wants to see branch hours reduced, and there currently is no conversation about shuttering branches. In the poll, 56 percent of city residents said that closing the local branch would have a "major impact" on the community. Those feelings were particularly strong among African Americans (68 percent) and people with household incomes under $30,000 (63 percent).

If further budget cuts are required, 25 percent of library users say they would approve of shutting down some branches altogether while 42 percent would prefer a reduction in library hours. Another 28 percent favor retaining all library services, even if it means cutting other city services.

MAKING PARKWAY CENTRAL A MORE WELCOMING PLACE

Parkway Central is the flagship of the system and a cultural landmark. It is, as board member Peter Benoliel pointed out, the only cultural institution on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway that does not charge an entrance fee.

In interviews for this study, many branch patrons indicated that they were unfamiliar with what the main library had to offer, or why they would go there. Some thought it was for college students or specialized researchers. Others said they had such strong relationships with their local librarians that they saw no need to go elsewhere in the system. Among those who went to Parkway Central, many said they went solely for the longer time limit on the public-access computers.

As it stands, the building doesn't entice users to come in and linger. Library officials are trying to change this. Plans in the works call for a new cafe and additional seating in more casual settings. In other cities, new and refurbished central libraries feature flexible spaces and large areas for the public—with less space given over to stacks and other behind-the-scenes uses. The Free Library hopes to include these elements in its refurbishing and expansion of the main building, the details of which remain under development. Whatever the scale of the plan turns out to be, one challenge will be to make sure that the investment does not come at the expense of the branches—where most Philadelphians get library services.

SECURING SUSTAINABLE FUNDING

A major challenge for the Free Library's future is financial. The library is plagued by uncertainty over how much it will get in public funds each year and the knowledge that the amount could well be less than the year before. All of this makes long-term planning difficult.

One option is to set up a library-funding task force to address

- the level of funding the library needs to maintain a baseline of services
- the level of funding the library needs to thrive
- the most viable ways to create a sustainable funding base for the library.

With the library providing an increasing number of community-based services, a task force might explore opportunities for grants and funding from such government sectors as public health, social services and workforce development. In other cities, voters have approved dedicated funding sources for their libraries.

Dealing with all of these sorts of issues is critical for urban library systems across the country, as they try to cope with an economy that creates a greater demand for services and a lesser ability of government to help pay for them.

"We will survive as institutions," said Mary Dempsey, who ran the Chicago Public Library until earlier this year. "But the question is: What will we look like when this is over?" ○

Notes

1.   The library's total cost of $63.6 million includes the city's general fund allocation, employee benefits, grants, and foundation contributions to programming. The library's stated budget of $45,743,246 does not include benefit figures.

2.   New York City is home to three separate public library systems: the Brooklyn Public Library, the Queens Public Library and the New York Public Library, which covers the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island. These three systems were chartered prior to the merger of the five boroughs in 1898.

3.   All of the systems provided the Philadelphia Research Initiative with their total scheduled public hours for a typical week in May, 2011. They provided the total scheduled public hours for their main library during the same period. To calculate branch hours, we subtracted the number of main library hours from the total number of weekly services hours. We then divided the number of branch hours by the number of neighborhood branches.

4.   The circulation figure does not include downloads of ebooks and other electronic material.

5.   Samantha Becker, Michael D. Crandall, Karen E. Fisher, Rebecca Blakewood, Bo Kinney, and Cadi Russell-Sauvé, *Opportunity for All: How Library Policies and Practices Impact Public Internet Access*. Washington, D.C.: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2011, p. 113.

6.   Packman said the library based this estimate on attendance surveys.

7.   This number includes employee benefits.

8.   This number includes the city's general fund allocation, employee benefits, grants, and foundations contributions to programming.

9.   Westbrook v. Nutter, No. 08-4091, 08-4395, 2009 WL 3069897 (Pa. Com Pl. Jan. 5, 2009).

10.   Local government contributions account for 60 to 90 percent of the budget of all libraries except in Baltimore, where about 40 percent comes from the city and nearly 50 percent from the state of Maryland.

11.   In Fiscal 2011, expenditures fell by 1 percent in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

12.   April Bethea, Mark Price and Kirsten Valle, "Library scrambles to avoid closures; More cuts loom; Upcoming budget year looks to bring even more painful cuts for county agencies," *Charlotte Observer*, March 23, 2010.

13.   Reginald Zimmerman, "Allston-Brighton residents protest vote to close Faneuil Branch Library," *Patriot Ledger*, April 14, 2010.

14.   Melissa Maynard, "Outsourcing the local library can lead to a loud backlash," *Stateline*, August 1, 2011.

15.   David Streitfeld, "Anger as a Private Company Takes Over Libraries," *New York Times*, September 26, 2010.

16.   American Library Association Policy Manual, 52.7: *Privatization of Publicly Funded Libraries*. http://www.ala.org/aboutala/governance/policy-manual (accessed January 30, 2012).

17.   Rich Lord, "Library funding OK'd by big margin," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, November 9, 2011.

18.   Over the last three fiscal years, these three branches are the only branches that consistently have been among the top five performers in visits, circulation and program attendance.

19.   Stephan Salisbury, "Library Expansion Still on Track, Officials say; Funds are being raised for a $120 million renovation of the Central Library—despite planned cutbacks and layoffs," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 23, 2005.

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Methodology

We at the Philadelphia Research Initiative relied on four sources of data for information on library use and resources.

One is a survey of urban library systems that we conducted. In the survey, we asked each system for data on library visits, circulation, digital downloads, program attendance, public-access computers and computer sessions, weekly hours, operating expenditures, sources of income, and full-time-equivalent employees. We asked the systems to provide data for fiscal years 2005, 2010 and 2011. Submissions were discussed with officials at each system to confirm accuracy.

The second is the Public Library Association's Public Library Data Service (PLDS), an annual survey compiled by the association from its members. Most of the Fiscal 2008 data on library use and resources comes from the service. We confirmed each PLDS number that we used with the individual library system. On the subject of staffing levels, it is important to note that our survey and the PLDS count are slightly different. We asked for the total number of full-time employees, excluding vacant positions, on the last day of the fiscal year. PLDS asked for total positions including "unfilled positions if a search is currently underway."

The third is the Public Libraries Survey conducted by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. We used this data for Seattle and Boston because PLDS data were missing or appeared to be inaccurate.

Finally, all data on the Free Library of Philadelphia—including branch utilization, unscheduled closings and revenue from fines—come directly from the Free Library.

To calculate the per capita numbers that appear in the text and graphics, we relied on the population numbers from the 2010 Census for the area served, whether it was a city alone, a city and the surrounding county, or a specified service area.

Information about how Philadelphians use their library and what they think about it came from questions contained in the Philadelphia Research Initiative's annual benchmark survey. The poll was conducted by telephone between January 4 and January 19, 2012, among a citywide random sample of 1,600 city residents, ages 18 and older. Interviews were conducted with 1,200 landline users and 400 cell phone users to reach a broad representative sample of Philadelphians. The final sample was weighted to reflect the demographic breakdown of the city. The margin of error for the entire sample is approximately +/- 2.5 percentage points. The margin of error is higher for subgroups. Surveys are subject to other error sources as well, including sampling coverage error, recording error and respondent error. Abt SRBI Public Affairs designed the survey and conducted all interviewing, working with Cliff Zukin, veteran pollster and professor of public policy and political science at Rutgers University.

To access the survey questions, visit http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/www pewtrustsorg/Reports/Philadelphia_Research_ Initiative/Library-City-Philadelphia-Poll.pdf.

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