

Irene M. Padilla and Skip Auld: What if America fully funded its public libraries? | COMMENTARY

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by Irene M. Padilla and Skip Auld

Imagine having to wait outside for other patrons to leave a library before you could enter. Or being one of hundreds of children turned away each year because your library's meeting room was limited to fifteen.

Visitors to the 2,800-square-foot North East branch, which served 26,000 people, faced these challenges for years. The space was that small.

On April 23, Cecil County dedicated a new 43,000-square-foot facility to provide 21st-century library service. And not a moment too soon. A 90% increase in population is projected between 2005 and 2040, and yet the project stalled for years until state local funding could be secured.

The new building features an early literacy center and is walkable from the middle and elementary schools, welcoming children of all ages to a variety of new spaces and programs.

With Congress looking at an infrastructure package, we have an opportunity to supplement state and local support with funds from the bi-partisan Build America's Libraries Act. If passed, this legislation will dedicate \$5 billion to the construction and renovation of libraries nationwide, an estimated \$85.8 million of which would be allocated for Maryland.

Maryland is one state of 15 that provides funding for the construction of library buildings, and Cecil County's is the 19th facility made possible by the County Library Capital Grant Program, enacted unanimously in 2008. State and local support for Maryland public libraries is a model for our nation, and we are thankful for it, however, there simply isn't enough funding to meet the infrastructure needs of libraries in every community.

In some areas, like the Charlotte Hall Library in St. Mary's County, a 40-year old building with few electrical outlets, there are no sources to match state funding.

Before the 50-year old Annapolis Library was closed, snow on the roof caused

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38 leaks and the branch's closure for 10 weeks. The new Michael E. Busch Annapolis Library, which opened in 2020, was the first new library in the county in 16 years and took 20 years to be funded and built.

The Maryland State Library's facilities assessment in November 2020 determined that more than half our public library buildings are over 25 years old. Seventeen buildings need new roofs, 10 require alterations for ADA compliance, 17 have HVAC systems at the end of their useful lives, 43 require technological upgrades, 55 need general renovation at an estimated cost of \$77,000,000, and eight have been identified for replacement at an estimated cost of \$65,000,000.

During the 2021 session, the General Assembly increased the annual state funding mandate for the library grant program from \$5 million to \$7.5 million. But even at this level, it will take 20 years to meet the immediate needs of Maryland's libraries.

And while new libraries are a reason for celebration, the majority of grants are awarded to smaller, but critical, projects like the renovation of the Hampden Library in Baltimore City, which did not have a public restroom.

Providing inclusive places to gather is a core principle of public libraries. We offer equitable access to educational advancement, economic opportunity, and lifeline services for all. Yet, federal funding for libraries ceased in 1997.

The Build America's Libraries Act would enable us to complete more robust upgrades to our oldest branches, exponentially increase the supply of borrowable technology and internet access, and dutifully ensure the staffing needed to meet community needs.

Let's build on Maryland's commitment to its residents and urge our Congressional delegation to cosponsor the Build America's Libraries Act, so we can strengthen and sustain our library infrastructure for generations to come.