



February 28, 2023

The Honorable Guy Guzzone, Chair  
Senate Budget and Taxation Committee  
3 West Miller Senate Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

The Honorable Jim Rosapepe, Vice Chair  
101 James Senate Office Building  
11 Bladen Street  
Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Chairman Guzzone and Members of the Committee:

I am the CEO of Baltimore County Public Library and the President Elect of the Public Library Association. I write in support of SB501, the Aging Infrastructure Capital Improvement Grant Program for Libraries. This infusion of capital dollars into libraries - \$40 million for each of fiscal years 2024 through 2029 - would be a game changer for the communities served by public libraries.

Baltimore County Public Library has 19 heavily used and well-loved facilities that are visited by nearly 2 million residents annually. The average age of our branches is 50 years old, with the oldest being over 200 years old. Aging facilities means outdated infrastructure systems that are increasingly challenging and costly to maintain. Further, our branches were built at a time when library service looked very different from today.

Today's libraries are community hubs that create opportunities for creativity, discovery, and play. They support students and lifelong learners, and provide dynamic spaces for all age groups, such as BCPL's Storyville locations for early learners and their families. Our social workers on staff, tax assistance services, distribution of snacks and meals to kids facing food insecurity, and very successful *Lawyers in the Library* program are just some of the ways BCPL provides a lifeline to many. Our libraries strengthen the wealth and economic vitality of the community because they support job seekers and job creators, alike. An example of the latter is BCPL's successful *Entrepreneur Academy* where we teach budding entrepreneurs the nuts and bolts of starting a successful business. Public libraries directly address digital inequity in their communities by loaning Wi-Fi Hotspots and Chromebooks so that people have reliable access to the Internet at home. Libraries strengthen democracy, encouraging a well-informed citizenry and facilitating civic engagement and thoughtful discourse. In short, public libraries support healthy and vibrant communities.

Eleven of BCPL's 19 facilities are in need of critical capital investment, to include renovation, expansion, and/or new construction. BCPL has several key capital projects in the pipeline over the coming years, to include Catonsville (Districts 44/44B), Woodlawn (Districts 44/44B), Essex (Districts 6/6), Lansdowne (Districts 44/44A), Towson (Districts 43/43B), Randallstown (Districts 10/10), and North Point (Districts 6/6) branches. The collective cost for all of these projects is roughly \$260 million.

BCPL, and all public libraries in the state, are fortunate to have access to the County Library Capital Grant Program to help with funding of capital projects. 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 decades to meet the immediate needs of BCPL and Maryland's public libraries. When you factor that in today's dollars, the average cost for a library renovation is around \$20 million and new construction starts at \$40 million, you can see that available funding for libraries is insufficient to address needs.

This is a national issue as well as a local issue. America's public libraries are an essential part of our nation's infrastructure, with 17,000 locations across the country. As the nation moves forward from the devastating impacts of a global pandemic and related economic and educational losses, rejuvenating libraries in our most distressed communities must be part of that recovery. Libraries need healthy buildings and modern equipment to continue addressing the challenges so many are facing. We want Maryland to have the best libraries in the country.

People often make decisions about where they want to live and raise a family based, in part, on proximity to the public library. Libraries are integral to the quality of life for any community because they strengthen the ability for people to succeed and thrive. Investing in library facilities, therefore, is a direct investment in the communities that use them. I strongly urge passage of SB501 so we can modernize, strengthen, and sustain our library infrastructure for today and tomorrow.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Best,



Sonia Alcántara-Antoine  
CEO