

DC Public Library

FY11-12 PERFORMANCE OVERSIGHT HEARING

February 15, 2012

OPENING STATEMENT

Good afternoon. I am Councilmember Tommy Wells, Chairperson of the Committee on Libraries, Parks, Recreation, and Planning. The time is 2:10pm on Wednesday, February 15, 2012. We are in room 412 of the John A. Wilson building to conduct a public oversight hearing on the DC Public Library.

The very concept of the public library is that information and education must be free – that everyone is equal when they walk through the library doors. Accordingly, the mission of the DC Public Library is to provide access to materials, information, programs, and services that enables every resident, in every Ward, access to lifelong learning, and an enhanced quality of life that helps build a thriving city. It does all this at our main library, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library downtown, and throughout the District at 24 neighborhood libraries.

Although some may have predicted that the increase in technology and the creation of the eReader would bring on the death of the public library, from DCPL's circulation figures, that couldn't be further from the truth. Circulation here in the District has tripled since 2006 and corresponds to a national trend of reaching new heights. But in order to sustain -- indeed increase -- this growth, we must commit to restoring the book budget; to provide professional development to our dedicated staff; and continue to provide all the exceptional programs and services that help us grow as individuals, as a community, and as a city.

The library, not surprisingly, provides countless opportunities in education and exploration, both through books and programming. What may not be as apparent is the work the library does for those seeking employment. A recent nationwide survey, that included DC, revealed that 40% of all adults visiting the library are doing so as part of a job search. The library offers more than 800 computers for public use to aid in online applications and job searches; and the library also provides numerous programs for job seekers, which cover topics as diverse as resume building to computer skills.

The library is also the center of civic activity, hosting thousands of public community meetings each year. To continue this trend, we must ensure our libraries are welcoming and safe places. Such investment must include the improvement of our central library, the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library. When I received this Committee in July of last year, the FY12 budget called for closing MLK on Sundays – this would have been the first time in more than 30 years that the MLK library was not open on Sunday afternoons. I worked with Mayor Gray to restore funding for Sunday afternoons and the closure plan was reversed before it began.

We will touch on all these topics this afternoon, but as this is the first performance oversight hearing I have chaired for the DC Public Library, I will also spend some time understanding the basic organization and operations of the library.

Ms. Cooper and Mr. Hill – I have reviewed the library’s responses to the Committee’s oversight questions, which were submitted in advance of this hearing. I understand that we may have asked the most number of questions in recent history, and I want to thank you and your staff for prompt and complete responses.

While reviewing these responses, I noted that the agency has met or exceeded its target for most performance indicators, which is astounding, given the dramatic cuts the Library has sustained over the last several years. We will talk some today about recent trends in circulation and service, and what challenges the library faces in the face of a diminishing budget and staff.

Before we begin, I also want to acknowledge the work of the Friends of the Library, several of whom are here to testify today. The Friends are a group of dedicated library users who support all types of programming and do exceptional advocacy on behalf of the Library. I thank the Friends for their passion and commitment for our public library.

With that, let us hear from our public witnesses.