

FRIENDS of Watha T. Daniel/Shaw LIBRARY

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Testimony of Pleasant Mann, Secretary Friends of the Watha T. Daniel/Shaw Library to the Committee on Libraries, Parks, Recreation and Planning

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I want to thank the Chair and the members of the committee for the opportunity to testify today on the performance of the DC Public Library System. I am Pleasant Mann and I serve as Secretary of the Friends of the Watha T. Daniel/Shaw Library.

The Watha T. Daniel branch is a vivid illustration of the progress made by the DC library system in recent years. The building itself, designed by the noted architectural firm of Davis, Brody Bond Aedas, has drawn wide acclaim and has recently received Gold LEED certification. While the library it replaced had faced declining usage, the current branch is typically filled with users, day or night, during the hours it is open. While the old branch only had a couple of computers available to the public, now we have a total of 40 for adults, teens and children, not to mention the availability of WiFi for patrons with their own computers. The branch is becoming an increasingly important resource for the neighborhood with the decline of the American bookstore and the record and video shop. Watha T. Daniel has also become an important community hub, with most of its community rooms fully booked. It also played an important role in Shaw's Art All Night festival in September 2011, where it served as a venue for a fashion show attended by thousands of people.

The Watha T. Daniel Friends have been successful in supporting the programs of our branch. We have gotten funding for library programs from developers working on the new projects in the community through the Planned Unit Development (PUD) process, which provides for new amenities to compensate for zoning relief. Working with the DCPL Foundation, we have been able to use this money to support the numerous program initiatives of Branch Librarian Eric Riley, including the purchase of a wooden floor for dance classes and the creation of a new literacy program combined with fashion design.

As you may know, however, the library system, despite its successes, has had to face continuing cuts in its budget. Although our Branch and the DC library system have had continual increases in circulation, the library budgets for books and materials and for personnel have severely shrunk. While the square footage of the DCPL system has increased by 30 percent over the past five years, its maintenance budget over the same period has dropped by 55 percent. If DCPL is to continue its success and promise, its budget will have to be significantly increased next year.

One area where there has to be an increase in the budget is in security. We would not have been able to use the branch for Art All Night had it not been for the Library Police and the security system that has been set up in the building. However, the library budget for security has been cut over the years like everything else. When people feel they are unsafe in a library, they are not inclined to use it. In the old Watha T. Daniel branch, security was largely the responsibility of the Branch Librarian, an unasked for collateral duty. As a result, use of the branch was limited. A promising children's librarian left the branch, but I hope not the profession, when he was beat up by a group of teenagers on the second floor. Due to the design, staffing and patronage of the new Watha T. Daniel, something like that could not happen now, but it is a cautionary tale of what could happen if the budget for safety does not see increases soon.

There are some other areas where increases to the budget could help the operations of Watha T. Daniel. As I mentioned, the branch seems to be fully used during the times it is open, which is eight hours a day, six days a week, even though the cycle of changing hours of opening probably confuses some patrons. A move to keep the branch open 12 hours a day for four days a week would probably see a comparable increase in library usage. Opening on Sunday afternoons might also encourage a tradition of students working on assignments before the beginning of the school week.

An increase in branch hours would also require an increase in the library maintenance budget. Currently, the contract for building maintenance only covers five days a week. If a maintenance problem occurs on a Saturday, it cannot be corrected until the next week. This situation cannot continue if the library is to be a valued community asset.

Finally, I wanted to suggest one more area that could use more funding. DCPL has a program called the Teens of Distinction, which provides students a structured opportunity to perform sophisticated work for library programs at a decent salary. Currently the program is very small. If it could be expanded so that young people in Shaw could see their peers doing important work, it may help in providing career models in our economically diverse community.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on the progress made by the Watha T. Daniel branch library and the DCPL system. I am sure that you recognize the need for significant increases in its budget over the next year.