

**TESTIMONY OF JOHN W. HILL
President
Board of Library Trustees**

**Delivered at a public hearing before the
Committee on Libraries, Parks and Recreation**

on

The Performance of District of Columbia Public Libraries

**Wednesday, February 15, 2012
2:00 PM**

Good afternoon Chairman Wells and members of the Committee on Libraries, Parks and Recreation. My name is John Hill, and I serve as President of the Board of Library Trustees. I am pleased to represent the Board of Trustees here today alongside the District's Chief Librarian Ginnie Cooper to discuss with pride the great progress and future of our District of Columbia Public Library system.

Over the course of my tenure, the Board of Trustees, working hand in hand with Ms. Cooper has begun to deliver on the vision and she has given the residents some great examples of what the DC Library System of the future will look and feel like. With the help of the Mayor and the Council we are moving forward to make sure that the system never returns to the state this current Board of Trustees and Chief Librarian confronted only a few years ago.

As you know the District Government through the Mayor and the Council have made a remarkable and historic investment in our DC Library System. Mr. Chairman, I know of your personal commitment of time and of new energy that serves the residents of this great city well as we work together to deliver the best of library services on can offer. I want to personally thank you for your support and the hard work you have done as chairman of this committee. You have supported the integrity of the Library Board's decision making process in face of political pressure in the naming of our Bellevue branch library building. The board appreciates your willingness to buck the tide and stand with us for what is right.

Mr. Chairman we have embarked on a journey to create "A Model Library System for the Nation" where learning, literacy and technology are key components. A vibrant library system is a visible symbol of the importance that a city places on sharing knowledge and serving its community's needs. This strategy demands that we:

- Re-define the system as a place that integrates learning, literacy and technology and functions as a leader in addressing the crisis of adult illiteracy in Washington, DC.
- Transform the system into a state-of-the art library integrating innovative programs and multi-media technology
- Create gateways to learning by providing access to the wealth of knowledge resident in the institutions of the nation's capital.
- Provide new library programs in new or renovated branch library buildings throughout the city

- Provide school age children with inspiring 21st century libraries where they can do their homework and research, find a safe place outside of school to pursue learning and discover the love of books and reading
- Provide all adults, whether they are authors or learning to read for the first time, the reasons to embrace our libraries as a treasured community asset and finally this strategy demands we
- Re-establish the library as a vibrant cultural institution

We have always known this would not be an easy task and it would take time. We are well on our way to this goal however with the work we have done on our programs and all our existing buildings. However much still remains to be done. To achieve this vision the District must both replace the obsolete Martin Luther King Jr. Central Library and rebuild all our neighborhood libraries.

The new MLK Library will be the center of the new system, providing universal access to an expanded base and network of information, resources and services. A wonderfully new 21st century central library will offer:

- Cutting edge technology
- Innovative community spaces
- Creative spaces for youth and teens
- New programs along with the traditional offerings of the nation's best public libraries
- Signature architecture

The “new” MLK library and system will be “branded” with a fresh contemporary identity. MLK library should be an architecturally exciting, active multi-function building to serve the public. A new central library would have a positive and significant effect on our Downtown and our neighborhoods in the following ways.

- Promote Culture:
 - High quality public spaces and programs that draw a cross-section of Washington’s residents
- Contribute to Downtown and Neighborhood Revitalization:
 - A landmark and civic destination as part of a varied new and refurbished mixed-use development area
 - Serve as the branch library for tens of thousands of new and existing residents of downtown
 - A hub for providing resources to a neighborhood branch system
- Be Democratic and Inclusive:
 - A destination that is oriented and accessible to all
 - Promote education and help bridge the “digital divide”
- Create Civic Gathering Spaces:
 - Indoor cafes, technology & media access, and a vibrant outdoor plaza
- Promote Dynamic Programming:
 - A 21st century media center – with books, magazines, technology, photography, video, film series

- Strong community programming – theater and events, exhibitions, children’s activities, bookstore and teen center

Branch libraries, which become the neighborhood focal points for information access, technology and literacy programs must be:

- Equipped with the latest computer access and learning programs,
- Responsive to the information needs of schools, universities and the business community through creative programming and partnerships
- Equipped with programs and equipment to address our high adult illiteracy rate
- Providing new resources for growing immigrant populations, including expanded collections in Spanish and other languages
- Open seven days a week with hours that work for those who use it
- Be architecturally significant structures that project the importance of the activities contain within them to the outside.

The Board of Library Trustees has adopted a strategy that we believe will not only protect our investment, but will help grow that investment; providing dividends in improved service to residents well into the future. We must continue our course to improve all of our neighborhood libraries so that every resident has access to these services and we must make clear and decisive steps that will lead to creating a “new” MLK Central Library. We believe that we can both continue our course on the neighborhood library revitalization program and plan and begin construction on a “new” MLK Central Library over the next several years. We must however answer the questions raised by a recent study of our

central library building by the Urban Land Institute and chart a clear path with resident and political support to a new future.

In addition to the work mentioned above the Library Board of Trustees must plan for the future leadership of the Library System. All current Library Board members are past their initial terms which provides us the opportunity to plan for an orderly transition to a new board that will continue this work well into the future. We are also have a Chief Librarian that by any measure is the considered the best in the world. She has done exceptional work and created one of the highest performing teams in the District Government and accomplished far more than was originally thought possible. We would love for her to stay as long as she would want however we all know that at some point in the future we have to look for a new leader; one that could never replace Ms. Cooper but continue and build on her great successes. We have the opportunity to plan for that orderly transition which all hope is years away.

Mr. Chairman, we have much to be proud of in the work of the Chief Librarian and her exceptional team, with your help and that of the Mayor and the full Council we can have even more success to be proud of at our next performance hearing. Thank you for allowing me to testify today. Ms. Cooper will provide the details of the program successes and challenges and I will be here to answer any questions you may have at the appropriate time.