

BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY

TESTIMONY ON THE FY2026 PRELIMINARY BUDGET

Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries & International Intergroup Relations

March 18, 2025

Good morning. I am Linda Johnson, President & CEO of Brooklyn Public Library. Thank you, Speaker Adams, Finance Chair Brannan, Chair Rivera, members of the committee, our Brooklyn delegation, and the entire City Council for your continued support of libraries.

It is a welcome change — and a testament to your leadership — that this year our conversation is about investing in libraries, not cutting them. I was thrilled to hear the Speaker detail her \$2 million proposal to expand seven-day service to 10 additional branches across the city. For years, Brooklyn Public Library has operated on an essentially flat budget—our city deserves the expanded services this proposal envisions.

However, the Fiscal Year 2026 Preliminary Budget does not carry forward the Council's **\$15.7 million Libraries Initiative** and falls short of what's needed to sustain our services, let alone expand them. Today, I urge the City to **restore this funding and invest an additional \$44.8 million** in New York City's libraries. Your support is needed even more after last week's White House Executive Order targeting library work nationally.

Libraries Strengthen New York

Libraries are the connection point for a diverse array of New Yorkers, so many of whom pour their skills and knowledge back into the city. We provide much more than books and resources, with an impact that spreads far beyond our physical branches.

At our Business and Career Center, librarians help New Yorkers realize their dreams: hosting resume workshops, career fairs, one-on-one business counseling sessions, and classes on everything from how to use Excel to AI basics for businesses. For 21 years, our PowerUp competition has helped nearly 11,000 entrepreneurs launch businesses and create jobs. Notable winners include Brooklyn Tea, which now offers employee college scholarships, and others who give back by catering community events.

New Yorkers know libraries change lives—and they're eager to lend a hand, signing up to support their neighbors and help our libraries run while gaining valuable skills themselves. This year, nearly 1,500 volunteers have led English conversation groups, citizenship coaching, and homework help—a 30% increase over last year.

Our patrons want to connect with one another, and we all feel that democratic spaces — libraries in particular — are needed now more than ever. Despite last year’s mid-year cuts, demand for library services continued to grow. In 2024, annual visits rose to nearly 6 million, program sessions increased by 19%, and books and digital materials circulated 9.4 million times. However, patrons still felt the impact of the cuts—longer wait times, fewer open hours, and disrupted programming. I’m very proud of BPL’s 1,103 employees — including our Local 1482 members, who are on the front lines — and the work they were able to do during this very trying time.

Unfunded Needs

City Council helped reverse these devastating cuts and reopen our doors—but we did not truly return to business as usual. In fact, we haven’t been able to resume business as usual for years. We have been operating on pre-pandemic funding levels despite a soaring increase in the cost of doing business. Our patrons still experience long wait times for books, and we are consistently too thinly staffed, unable to build a strong enough base due to inadequate funding coupled with the yearly threat of cuts.

BPL has \$12.4 million in unmet needs—not just due to inflation, but unavoidable costs like union salary increases, health care premiums, and the rising cost of books, especially digital materials. We must also cover operations for two new locations, the Center for Brooklyn History and the Library for Arts and Culture, where staff provide highly in-demand and specialized programming and resources.

Building maintenance is another growing cost and urgent concern. In Fiscal Year 2024, we lost nearly 500 hours of operating time due to aging infrastructure. On average, our branches are over 70 years old. And 19 of our buildings are more than a century old. Maintenance costs for HVAC, fire alarms, and elevators have risen by \$3 million in the past five years. Keeping libraries open consistently is our top priority—but failing systems put service at risk.

Capital

Last year, the City rescinded \$47 million of our capital funds, compounding the challenges we already face. Brooklyn Public Library’s unfunded capital needs now exceed \$400 million—one-third of which are urgent, emergency projects like roofs, HVAC systems, fire safety, and accessibility upgrades.

But we must also consider longer-term projects. This year, BPL's submission for the 10-Year Plan included \$307.7 million to cover critical systemwide infrastructure and to initiate cost-effective, comprehensive branch overhauls, rather than piecemeal projects. It has been a decade since libraries last received a major allocation in the City's 10-Year Capital Plan, which we used to launch transformational projects, such as our renovations at Canarsie and New Lots Libraries. These new, innovative spaces will serve as beacons in their neighborhoods, meeting our strategic priorities with dedicated teen spaces and larger community meeting rooms.

All Brooklyn neighborhoods should have modern libraries with spaces that accommodate patrons needs. But without recurring capital funding, we cannot efficiently plan, modernize, or manage our facilities. Sustained investment in the 10-Year Capital Plan is needed.

We are deeply grateful to the Council, our Brooklyn delegation, and individual Council Members for their steadfast support of library capital projects. As in previous years, Brooklyn Public Library is requesting \$10 million in discretionary capital funding from the Council, through our delegation, to address repairs and project shortfalls across the borough.

Conclusion

New Yorkers deserve beautiful, safe public spaces. During these times of disconnection and dissension, libraries have risen to serve as community connectors. At our recent Night in the Library, there was a palpable yearning for unity as over 5,000 gathered to learn, debate and even dance together. Right now, hundreds are gathering in that same lobby at Central Library for a job fair.

You, our loyal supporters, truly understand the challenges we face and the investment we need to continue this urgent work. Addressing unmet needs and securing capital funding will strengthen our communities and help New Yorkers build a better future.

Thank you for protecting our libraries—one of the city's most valuable public resources.



NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL
Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2026 the Preliminary Capital Plan for Fiscal
Years 2026-2029 and The Fiscal 2025 Preliminary Mayor's Management Report

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES & INTERNATIONAL
INTERGROUP RELATIONS
March 18, 2025

Good morning, my name is Tony Marx and I am the president of The New York Public Library (NYPL). I want to thank City Council Speaker Adams, Chair Rivera, and the members of the committee for the opportunity to testify today on the Mayor's Fiscal Year 2026 (FY26) Preliminary Budget.

Since 2021, New York City's libraries have faced significant reductions to their operating budgets and sustained four consecutive years of mid-year budget cuts. We are grateful to this body, the City, and the general public for their recognition of Libraries' indispensable role within the lives of New Yorkers and consequent support to restore our operating budget each of these years. At the same time, this annual budget dance has resigned us to playing defense. Instead of dedicating time to adjust our offerings to be more reflective of community needs, we have spent the past few budget cycles figuring out how to maintain the current levels – or account for significant disruptions in service. This annual exercise precluded us from solidifying our existing presence in our communities, expanding our offerings, or revisiting our institutional priorities.

I am relieved that for the first time in several years, the city's libraries do not face budget cuts. As a result, FY26 presents a unique opportunity for us to not only play catch up but to increase the range and depth of our offerings, and pursue our strategic goals. That is why this year the

city's three library systems are requesting a restoration and baselining of the City Council's \$15.7M in one-time funding and a baselined \$44.8M investment to our operating budgets, with \$18.9M for NYPL.

This request speaks directly to the opportunity FY26 presents. As we've fought to get back to level funding each year, our costs of operation have risen. This includes library materials such as our collections, wage increases, service points at newly-opened branches, cybersecurity, maintenance and repairs, and IT needs. Covering rising costs makes us more reliable and consistent within our current footprint. This translates to less unplanned closures that stem from limited staffing or unpredictable maintenance needs. It means that an after school location is there during its committed hours of operation, that a one-on-one college and career prep counseling session will not be canceled, or that a teen center can regularly be depended on as a place where youth can record music. A \$44.8M investment also means more services. We are ready to expand and improve upon the important work we are doing for the city of New York. We want to increase collections and research materials, add more teen centers and after school locations, and provide more story times for different stages of infancy and early childhood. It means more English classes for speakers of other languages, more book clubs for different age groups, more TechConnect courses to develop new professional skill sets, and more STEAM activities for kids. Many of these expansion efforts are already underway. For example, we have incorporated additional teen centers and after school locations into many of our renovated branches. We have also piloted innovative programs and technologies aimed at closing the digital divide. Most recently, we were awarded a \$3M grant to pilot a program with the Department of Housing and Preservation which will provide free WiFi to up to 2,000 Section 8 tenants.

Another key byproduct of this investment is our strategic priorities. In response to rising digital distraction and declining literacy rates, the Library is doubling-down on its commitment to be a

home for readers, learners, and researchers. That means more actively encouraging readers to borrow our circulating books, e-books, and audiobooks across the communities we serve. To do this, we plan to track and evaluate metrics such as materials borrowed, attendance at reader-focused programming, and new and returning patrons across materials, on a branch-by-branch basis. This is part of our commitment to expand and adjust our materials to the changing and rising needs of our communities. We will also identify and support emerging writers through programs, workshops, and community engagement. With respect to research, we plan to make our materials more accessible through services, outreach, exhibitions, programs, and fellowships that inspire ongoing engagement with our collections and resources.

But solidifying the consistency of our offerings, expanding them, and being able to make plans for the future is only one part of our FY26 aims. Capital improvements are an equally essential piece to NYPL's mission. Programming is of little value if it does not happen in a place that feels safe, welcoming, and respectful of New Yorkers right to knowledge and opportunity. The Libraries currently have \$1.2B in unmet capital needs, with \$485M from NYPL. For a local branch to become and remain integral to the fabric of a community, its presence must be reliable. But many of our spaces are in a constant state of disrepair and face critical issues that leave patrons feeling uncomfortable and/or unsafe. This is because most of the buildings in our system are aging, small, structures, some of them over 100 years old. In spite of this reality, the FY25 enacted budget included the Libraries' first Capital cut in ten years. With significant systemwide capital needs, the City should be increasing capital funding to libraries not cutting it.

We are aware of the challenges within the city capital process which more often than not result in costly budget shortfalls and significant project delays. We continue to work with our partners in government to think creatively about how we can improve the capital process and deliver projects on budget and on time. We are grateful to have been included in the administration's

efforts to remedy these issues through initiatives like the Capital Process Reform Task Force and the DDC blueprint.

Alongside these efforts, we took the initiative to innovate and find other creative solutions. One method is to ensure regular inclusion of libraries within the City's ten-year plan. Thanks to \$100M in funds committed by the City in the ten-year plan in FY16, we have just completed the full renovation of five, 100-plus year-old Carnegie branches in high-needs areas: Melrose and Hunts Point in the Bronx, Fort Washington and 125th Street in Manhattan, and Port Richmond in Staten Island. These locations were in dire need of capital upgrades for decades; their top-to-bottom makeovers allowed us to meet community needs such as ADA accessibility, dedicated spaces for teens and children, and facade restoration. The ribbon-cutting celebrations for these events have been well-attended by enthusiastic local elected officials and community members alike. These newly-renovated libraries with their beautiful, inspiring spaces have re-energized the communities they serve. We are ready to move ahead with the next round of full renovations. We are requesting that the city make a major capital allocation in this year's ten-year plan allowing us to replicate these incredible projects at Francis Martin and Soundview in the Bronx, Seward Park in Manhattan, and Great Kills on Staten Island.

Another capital project delivery innovation that we've had great success with is colocation, which incorporates new libraries within housing developments. Last summer, we cut the ribbon on our brand new, state of the art, Inwood Library, which was integrated within an affordable housing development with 172 units of housing and other amenities such as a community center and Universal Pre-K. The success of this project served as a blueprint for similar colocation initiatives, including a new Grand Concourse Library, which is currently in the Request for Proposal Development stage, and Bloomingdale Library, which we are discussing with our partners in the Administration and NYC Economic Development Corporation.

The third alternative that we hope will improve the city capital process is Design-Build. This provides for the streamlining of the design and construction processes to reduce the possibility of delays and shortfalls. Working with the Department of Design and Construction, we have agreed to proceed with the long-delayed project to build a brand new Westchester Square Library as Design-Build.

In addition to large-scale renovations, our systemwide FY26 priorities include state of good repair work such as HVAC, boilers and ADA accessibility, technology upgrades, and a number of shortfalls within ongoing projects at other branches. The unallocated capital funding we have received from the Speaker and the Council in previous years has been instrumental in our ability to address these types of needs. For this reason we are also requesting \$30M in lump sum capital funding - \$10 million for each borough the NYPL serves - from the council that can be allocated towards these priorities.

We know that when we renovate our spaces or build new ones to better accommodate the needs of New Yorkers, they are used more. Since the Inwood Library reopened last June, it has registered 24,200 new patrons for library cards. Its average monthly visits have also risen from 14,300 in 2019, its last year of full operation before closing for renovations, to 18,300 since it reopened. In March 2022, we opened a brand new Charleston branch on Staten Island. Since its grand opening, Charleston Library has signed 7,255 New Yorkers up for new library cards. In FY24 the branch had 18,000 program attendees; this number has already reached 10,000 in the first half of FY25.

We are living through a sociopolitical moment that has rendered libraries' mission more important to New Yorkers than ever. At a time when diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives are being curtailed across the country, when book-banning continues at an alarming rate, and when marginalized or underresourced communities face increasing barriers to advancement, Libraries

are an increasingly rare pillar of democracy and trusted community anchor for free access to knowledge and opportunity. Our common refrain, "Libraries are for everyone," has never been more important than it is now. It is fortuitous that libraries' unparalleled commitment to our democratic values has intersected with the first year, in many, that we do not face budget cuts. We ask for your support to make the most of this opportunity to not only be a reliable space New Yorkers can turn to in these dark times, but one from which they can still expect so much more.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions



**Statement by Dennis M. Walcott, President & CEO, Queens Public Library
NYC Council Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, & International Intergroup Relations**

**Oversight Hearing - Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2026, Preliminary Capital Plan for Fiscal
Years 2026-2029, and Fiscal 2025 Preliminary Mayor's Management Report
March 18, 2025**

Good morning. I am Dennis M. Walcott, President and CEO of Queens Public Library (QPL, Library). It is a pleasure to be here today. Chair Rivera, Speaker Adams, and the members of this esteemed Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Library's budget priorities for Fiscal Year 2026.

Queens Public Library is immensely grateful for the City Council's advocacy in support of New York City's libraries. When we sustained the mid-year Program to Eliminate the Gap (PEG) last year, forcing us to end seven-day service, and when we were facing staggering cuts that would have resulted in the end of universal six-day service, vast reductions to our collections, programs and services, and more, you recognized the devastating impact these actions would have on New Yorkers and fought for us. Now, the three public library systems are finally in a position where, instead of fighting budget reductions, we can talk about the support required to meet our needs and those of the public we serve. **This could not have happened without your tireless efforts, and we are deeply appreciative.**

With 66 locations in nearly every neighborhood, it is unsurprising that Queens Public Library is experiencing system-wide increases across our metrics. In FY24, we had 6.3 million visits to our branches, a circulation of 8.6 million, and a 16 percent increase in program attendance compared to the previous year. We prioritized upgrading our locations with external Wi-Fi extenders, allowing the public to access broadband service up to 150 yards from our buildings, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This effort resulted in Wi-Fi sessions increasing by 200%, and we expect that this fiscal year the trend for this - and other key benchmarks - will continue to rise.

We are thankful to the Administration that the FY26 Preliminary Budget keeps library budgets intact after years of proposed cuts. However, **this is the perfect moment to invest in public libraries**, where anyone — regardless of their circumstances, identity, or background — can follow their curiosity, form their own viewpoints, and access diverse, free information and resources. QPL's core services, along with our specialized programming and the expertise and dedication of our trusted staff, make it possible for people to discover and cultivate a world of opportunities.

QPL's Adult Learner Program (ALP) focuses on instruction for adults and young adults, while also providing access to social services with QPL case managers. These offerings are in high demand, with a total session attendance of more than 81,700, and at any given time, we have an ESOL waiting list of approximately 2,000 people, with half from Flushing Library. Through a collaboration with the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA), we provided *We Speak NYC* conversation classes and in a three-month period, served 868 students.

The Library draws and welcomes immigrants from across the world, and for over 47 years, QPL's New Americans Program (NAP) has offered citizenship and immigration workshops, cultural events, and related programming to help them adapt successfully to life in the United States. With attendance of over 14,300 in FY24, this work is crucial to our newest community members in a borough where nearly half of residents were born outside the country.

QPL's Job & Business Academy (JBA) provides in-depth classes, workshops, and individual counseling for job seekers, aspiring entrepreneurs, and business owners. These programs specialize in technology training, financial literacy, job search and interview help, and ESOL for professional settings. In FY24, JBA had a total attendance of more than 10,800.

Last year, QPL highlighted that, in addition to budget cuts, we were facing uncovered increased costs due to contractual wage and health insurance increases, inflation, deferred and capital ineligible repairs, and more, as well as the need to hire more staff — all of which remain a major challenge. **In total, QPL has an uncovered expense need of \$13.5 million in FY26, which we are asking the City to fund and baseline.** Without these funds, we are susceptible to unplanned closures due to staffing and emergency maintenance, unable to meet demand for the vital programs, services and library materials our communities rely on, and forced to defer critical maintenance and repairs. **That is why we are thrilled that the Speaker has included the three public library systems as a priority for the upcoming city budget, to address these outstanding needs and invest in our future.**

Our users view the Library as a means of unlocking their full potential. In February, we launched the initiative *1,000 Books Before Kindergarten*, which is designed to establish strong early literacy skills by encouraging parents and caregivers to read with their young children.

In January, QPL's College Readiness team welcomed more than 140 teens and their families to our Central Library for the "Teen Summer Opportunities Fair," which provided high school students with valuable resources, including information on internship opportunities and pre-college and leadership development programs, and helped them explore various career paths. In two weeks, Central Library is hosting a College Fair featuring representatives from public and private colleges and universities, workshops on financial aid and the admissions process, and more. Efforts like this, as well as individualized college coaching, college and career panels, and access to youth-centered spaces, such as our teen centers, help prepare young adults in Queens for their bright futures.

QPL's Mail-A-Book service offers homebound customers, regardless of age, the ability to have library materials delivered directly to their door and to participate in virtual and teleconference programs. This year, 165 people attended Mail-A-Book's annual virtual New Year's Eve event, giving participants the chance to celebrate and connect with others.

Our Justice Without Barriers initiative provides resources and professional guidance on issues that commonly affect justice-impacted individuals returning home after incarceration. Participants find support through programs on topics including mental health, building trades

and unions, parenting post-incarceration, and the hybrid series “Financially Fit,” which teaches comprehensive financial literacy, such as budgeting, managing credit, and planning for the future.

While this is only a snapshot of the remarkable work our staff does daily, it provides a glimpse at how Queens Public Library impacts people’s lives and helps create a more equitable and stronger city. The Council has long understood that we are a lifeline for New Yorkers with its \$15.7 million Library Initiative, through which QPL receives \$4.38 million. **We hope you will continue supporting the city’s public libraries by reauthorizing the initiative, and advocating for its baseline, at a minimum of \$15.7 million.**

Since the summer, Queens Public Library has celebrated several capital milestones. Our brand new, state-of-the-art Far Rockaway Library opened in July with nearly 2,000 visits on its first day. We also reopened the Broadway Library after a renovation of its lower level, which now offers a computer center and updated meeting rooms. Both the Hillcrest and Laurelton libraries reopened to the public after vital roof and HVAC replacements, and we welcomed the neighborhood back to the Bay Terrace Library after a comprehensive renovation.

We are seeing critical, long-awaited projects move forward. In the fall, we hosted groundbreaking for the renovation at Hollis Library and an expansion of Arverne Library, both managed by the NYC Department of Design & Construction (DDC). In 2025, DDC anticipates construction start of the Rego Park Library replacement building and renovation of Astoria Library, as well as the construction completion of the HVAC project at Seaside Library. With the leases finalized for the future Lefrak City and Court Square branches, QPL is working diligently on design documents for both spaces so we can begin construction.

It is our goal to ensure that our entire one-million-square-foot portfolio is modern, safe and welcoming. **Over the next 10 years, Queens Public Library has identified a system-wide capital need of \$413.38 million, with \$42.3 million representing our most urgent needs.** To ensure we can properly plan for the future and ensure functioning spaces that meet the evolving needs of our customers, QPL requires steady, reliable funding. **Significant inclusion in the City’s Ten-Year Plan is imperative for the Library to strategically address our immense capital needs.**

QPL currently has 35 active DDC projects, and at any moment, we could be informed of a shortfall. If not bridged, a shortfall could mean that a project must be paused, likely resulting in increased costs and construction timeline. In addition to sustaining expense cuts last fiscal year, QPL also sustained a \$32.2 million capital reduction that was never restored. **We respectfully request your support to increase the unrestricted capital funding QPL traditionally receives from the City Council to \$10 million.** This pot of funding is critical in allowing us to seamlessly fill shortfalls for any project in our system as soon as we are notified by DDC.

Strong libraries are essential for New York City to thrive. Especially in these times of uncertainty, we know that communities across Queens are relying on their local libraries for opportunities to learn, grow, connect to one another, and find accurate information, and we remain dedicated to ensuring we can be there for them. **This can only happen with bold and consistent investment in our expense and capital budgets in FY26 and beyond. We hope we can count on your unwavering support of Queens Public Library as we look towards Fiscal Year 2026.**