

**Brooklyn Public Library  
State Assembly Committee on Libraries**

**Hon. Micah Kellner, Chair**

**June 27, 2013**

Good morning Chairman Kellner and members of the Committee. My name is Linda Johnson and I am the President and CEO of Brooklyn Public Library (BPL). I am happy to be here this morning to speak with you about BPL's plans to build two brand-new, modern library facilities in Brooklyn.

BPL is one of the largest library systems in the United States, delivering exceptional library services to 2.5 million Brooklynites at 60 locations throughout the borough. Our extensive physical footprint is one of our greatest assets. Few if any social service organizations in Brooklyn provide service from as many locations as BPL or can boast of operating facilities in virtually every one of the borough's diverse communities. Maintaining this presence and ensuring that no community in Brooklyn is without library service are of paramount importance to BPL.

Our nearly one-million-square-foot physical plant is, however, a challenge to maintain. As you know, BPL, like library systems throughout the State, faces extraordinary fiscal pressure. We have seen government support drop at a time when nearly all metrics for library usage are at or near record levels. We are incredibly grateful that last weekend the City Council and the Mayor agreed to a Fiscal Year 2014 budget that fully restores a proposed 36% cut to BPL's funding. However, we still struggle with over \$300 million in deferred maintenance for all 60 of our libraries. The average age of a BPL facility is 58 years old and almost all of our branches suffer from maintenance problems. We receive an average of merely \$15 million a year from the City to maintain

our buildings. This funding is far from adequate and has left too many neighborhoods in Brooklyn with substandard physical facilities. BPL is making great strides to reinvent the way we provide library service by pioneering new programs and services and continually adapting our public service to meet the ever-changing needs of Brooklyn's diverse communities. Unfortunately, our physical plant in many Brooklyn neighborhoods fails to meet the needs of our patrons and the demands of 21<sup>st</sup>-century library service.

Addressing this problem requires creativity and a diverse toolkit of options. Over the last several years, BPL has made aggressive efforts to increase private support for the Library. We have recently revamped our development department and appointed a new Vice President of Development. Late last year, we opened the groundbreaking Shelby White and Leon Levy Information Commons at Central Library. This innovative co-working space was funded by a generous grant from the Leon Levy Foundation and is already among the most heavily used spaces in Central Library. We are in the early stages of the planning process to relocate our Business & Career Library to Central Library and create a state-of-the-art small business and career support resource ideally located to serve all Brooklyn residents. We hope to identify private funders to support this project as well.

Unfortunately, private fundraising can only go so far. As any not-for-profit leader can tell you, raising private funds to pay for basic infrastructure needs, especially in City-owned buildings, is extraordinarily difficult. For the vast majority of library branches in Brooklyn, BPL will have to continue to rely on support from our elected officials. We are currently managing many capital projects, including upgrading critical infrastructure at our Clinton Hill branch and totally renovating our Rugby branch. At other branches, BPL

is working with other not-for-profits to provide new and unique services and improve our buildings. In Red Hook and Williamsburg we are working with a new organization, Spaceworks, whose mission is to manage affordable workspaces for community-based artists. Spaceworks will assist with renovations at our Red Hook and Williamsburgh branches, create artist work spaces in the branches, and provide free arts education programming to BPL patrons.

In addition to these strategies, BPL is also pursuing two unique redevelopment opportunities in Downtown Brooklyn that would eliminate millions of dollars in unmet capital needs while developing two brand-new, modern library facilities. Both of these projects would take advantage of the uniquely valuable real estate occupied by two existing BPL branches to significantly improve the quality of library service in Brooklyn for generations to come.

Brooklyn Public Library is thrilled to have the opportunity to participate in these exciting projects. As part of BAM South, BPL will open a brand-new, 16,500-square-foot neighborhood library facility. This new branch will be among the newest and most modern library branches in New York City and will allow BPL to deliver truly 21<sup>st</sup>-century library services to the Fort Greene, Park Slope and Boerum Hill communities. We are excited about working with the community to develop a design and program for the new branch that truly reflects the diverse needs of our patrons and leverages the branch's unique location at the center of one of the City's most exciting cultural communities. The new branch will be ideally located above one of the busiest transit hubs in New York City and we hope that it will quickly emerge as a regional library hub capable of offering expanded programming available for all Brooklynites.

Our original plan was to fund the fit out of this new space at BAM South through the sale of our aging Pacific Street facility. The Pacific Street Library is over 110 years old and suffers from approximately \$10 million in capital needs. The branch is poorly laid out and, like too many of our older buildings, is not accessible to people with disabilities or anyone with limited mobility. Of the 18 “Carnegie” branches managed by BPL, Pacific has by far the most pressing and expensive needs. However, as we have discussed our proposed project with elected officials and community stakeholders over the last six months it has become clear that the community greatly values the architecture of the Pacific Street building and has concerns about library service moving from that location. We take seriously our responsibility to steward the architectural legacy of the Pacific Street branch as well as the 17 other Carnegie libraries in Brooklyn. BPL is committed to working with elected officials and community stakeholders to develop an appropriate plan for the Pacific Street building through an open community process. The plan will acknowledge the needs of the Library and the community. This plan could include maintaining some or all of the Pacific Street building and continuing to provide library service and programming for children in the community. So while we hope to move forward with our plans for Pacific, we recognize the need to engage in further discussions with stakeholders and to continue to explore other options.

Our Brooklyn Heights branch poses similar challenges and opportunities. This 1962 building is the largest in the system other than the Central Library and the only BPL facility other than Central to house two distinct operating units. It also faces over \$9.2 million in capital needs, including an estimated \$3.5-4.5 million to replace a non-functioning HVAC system. The building is also poorly laid out, with less than half of its

62,000 square feet open to the public and has an inefficient floor plan that hinders public service.

Our plan would realize the unique value of the real estate on which the Brooklyn Heights branch is located to develop a new, better branch to serve the neighborhood. Over the last several months, BPL has worked with a Community Advisory Committee made up of all the local elected officials as well as representatives from five community organizations and tenant groups to craft a redevelopment process that will respect the needs of the community, build the best branch possible for BPL and generate additional capital dollars that can be reinvested in branches throughout Brooklyn. We have worked to be as transparent as possible throughout the redevelopment process at Brooklyn Heights. By convening the Community Advisory Committee, BPL has actively sought the community's input in every phase of the project to date and we plan to continue doing so.. Last Thursday, in partnership with the New York City Economic Development Corporation, we released a request for proposals (RFP) that will guide our selection of a development partner for Brooklyn Heights.

Our RFP first and foremost requires the selected development partner to build and deliver to the City, at no cost to BPL, the core and shell of a new, 20,000-square-foot library (one of the five largest libraries in Brooklyn). No more than 5,000 square feet of the new library may be below grade and the library must have a separate and distinct entrance from the rest of the building. The library will be conveyed to the City of New York as a condominium unit for no more than \$1. Our new Brooklyn Heights branch will be a City-owned public building operated by BPL, just like the existing branch. BPL has committed to providing interim library service throughout the redevelopment process and

will do so either in partnership with our development partner or by using some of the funds generated by the sale of the property. The RFP specifies what library services BPL has committed to providing in an interim service location. We are eager to begin a public process to design the new branch.

The RFP also contains a number of important safeguards to protect BPL and the public's interest throughout the redevelopment process. BPL will include a "right of reacquisition" in the contract of sale. This provision will allow the City to reacquire title to the property if a development partner fails to deliver the core and shell of the new library to BPL by a specified date. The City will never lose control of the site and if a development partner defaults or otherwise fails to meet the terms of the contract the City will reacquire the site and rebuild the library in its current location. Several other terms will protect BPL through this process. The selected development partner will be required to close on the acquisition of the property simultaneously with closing on construction financing. BPL will have the right to continue operating the library in the existing building up until construction commences, at no cost to BPL. The development partner will be required to post a financial security sufficient to fund the construction of the core and shell as a prerequisite for closing.

As part of this process, BPL has negotiated a groundbreaking agreement with the City that will allow us to realize the proceeds generated by selling City-owned property. BPL will use these proceeds to fit out the new library and will reinvest the remaining proceeds in other libraries across the borough. By pursuing this strategy, BPL can deliver a large, modern library in Brooklyn Heights while generating significant and much-needed capital dollars for library branches boroughwide.

Our Brooklyn Heights and BAM South projects represent two of several strategies by which BPL is seeking to maintain and enhance Andrew Carnegie's priceless legacy of free and accessible public libraries for all Brooklyn residents. I look forward to continuing to work with Brooklyn's elected officials and community leaders to ensure that all Brooklynites have access to the best possible library facilities for decades to come.