



Published in the

# The New York Times

## New York Public Libraries Warn of a ‘Staggering’ Crisis With Infrastructure

By Winnie Hu

April 21, 2015

The Hunts Point Library in the South Bronx uses only two of the three floors in its Italian Renaissance building, which was built in 1929 with money from the industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. The quarters are so cramped that adult classes in English and computer skills spill over into the children’s area.

The top floor — built as a custodian’s living quarters — stays empty because there is no money to repurpose it into what the library needs now: a career and education center.

So library patrons like Norma Delgado have to make do with less. “I would love it if the library got more space, because I would take classes Monday to Friday,” said Ms. Delgado, 57, an unemployed home health aide from Ecuador who takes English classes twice a week to improve her chances of finding a job.

The Hunts Point Library, which is part of the New York Public Library system, is a lifeline in one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods. It is where homeless people check out apartment listings, the unemployed fine-tune their résumés, and children get free tutoring while their parents master new skills. But increasingly, the library and others in the city have been unable to meet the growing needs of their patrons, or even to offer as many programs and services as other branches, because they are constrained by aging buildings in need of renovation.

The city’s three public library systems — the New York Public Library, the Brooklyn Public Library and the Queens Library — are seeking \$1.4 billion in city funds over the next decade to bring all 217 public library branches up to modern building standards. Though library officials request capital money yearly as part of the city’s annual budget process, that amount is the largest in recent years and the request provides a detailed accounting of the problems that buildings often treasured as community resources are facing.

In a report released last month by library officials, they warned of “the staggering infrastructure crisis in our branches.” The Brownsville Library in Brooklyn, for example, has such severe problems with its air-conditioning system that it has to close on the hottest days of summer. Water has damaged the ceiling over a heavily used Chinese-language section at the Ulmer Park Library in Brooklyn. The report also cited overcrowding at the Corona Library in Queens and restrooms that were often out of service at the Port Richmond Library on Staten Island.

“The mayor and City Council know that millions of New Yorkers rely on the city’s public libraries, and that it is unacceptable for branches to be crumbling, hours to be limited, and the number of programs and services to be far short of demand,” said Tony Marx, president of the New York Public Library, which has 92 branches in the Bronx and Manhattan and on Staten Island.



Published in the

# The New York Times

But the effort to modernize the city's libraries has prompted one fiscal expert to question whether officials should also be looking at whether they could, or should, downsize in some cases, given the move toward a digital age and e-books that take up no room.

"They may be getting what they own into shape, but the question is, do they need all this space?" said Charles M. Brecher, consulting co-director of research for the Citizens Budget Commission, a government watchdog group. "It's like the firehouse question: Do we need every firehouse they built 75 years ago?"

After years of steep budget cuts under the Bloomberg administration, the city's libraries have been regaining ground under Mayor Bill de Blasio. In his first year in office, Mr. de Blasio, a Democrat, increased operating funds for libraries by \$22 million, to \$323 million, though library officials noted that only \$10 million of that was used directly for services to the public (the rest covered back pay for library workers and other costs related to a city-negotiated union agreement).

Library officials are seeking an increase to \$378 million for the next fiscal year, which begins July 1, to restore programs and services lost to budget cuts since the 2008 fiscal year.

James Parrott, deputy director and chief economist for the Fiscal Policy Institute, a nonpartisan research and education group, said he expected the libraries to receive "a reasonable commitment" from the de Blasio administration in terms of operating and capital dollars "since they play a critical role in furthering many of the mayor's top priorities." For instance, he said, libraries have helped to expand programs for early childhood education and after-school programming, and increase outreach to immigrants.

In another change, library officials said they were asked by the mayor's aides to present their long-term needs for consideration in the city's 10-year capital plan, which already includes \$566.1 million for previously approved library projects; the request for \$1.4 billion would be on top of that amount. In the past, library officials said they secured capital funds largely by appealing to elected officials, including borough presidents and members of the Council, but that often led to securing only enough for ad hoc repairs and inevitably resulted in an uneven distribution of funding.

Amy Spitalnick, a spokeswoman for Mr. de Blasio, declined to say whether he would increase funding for the libraries in his executive budget, which is expected next month and will also include an updated capital plan. Last year, he added \$15.6 million in capital funds for library projects. She said the administration had "made a clear commitment" to the city's libraries.

Council leaders have also called on the mayor to give the libraries more money. Eric Koch, a spokesman for the Council, said they were "proud to have made funding libraries one of our priorities in the budget response."

The Hunts Point Library, which performs on par with other medium-size branches, lends 110,000 books and materials a year and runs free classes and programs for 11,500 people annually.

"This library is a magnet for people who want to learn," said Angel Rivera, 49, who unloads trucks at the Hunts Point produce market and heads for the library when his shift is over to study for law school classes.



Published in the

# The New York Times

Olga Ramos, 39, a mother of three girls, said she learned how to use email at the library and now sends messages to her sisters in Mexico. She also took English classes but eventually had to go to another branch for a more advanced level. “I feel it should have more things that other libraries have because the community needs it,” Ms. Ramos said.

Library officials there have requested \$20 million to renovate the 12,283-square-foot building; an additional \$4 million has been approved for repairs.

Liana Acevedo, the Hunts Point Library manager, listed the problems as she walked through the building the other day. The roof was leaking. The windows did not fully close. The water pipes clogged often, causing toilets to overflow. There were too few electrical outlets.

Unlocking the door to the third floor, she stepped into a warren of light-filled rooms with crumbling plaster walls that she hoped to turn into a career and education center. She envisioned a day when people could look for jobs there, and take new classes in citizenship, coding and web design. Downstairs, the children’s area, once freed of adult classes, could be used for more activities, such as expanding its story time to make it bilingual.

Ms. Acevedo, 35, practically grew up at the library. Her family lived two blocks away and did not have much money, so the library became their regular place to visit. Her Puerto Rican mother taught herself English by reading romance novels. At 15, Ms. Acevedo was working part time as a library page, shelving books and helping out in the children’s area.

After high school, she worked at other branches in the Bronx and Manhattan while attending the College of Mount Saint Vincent and Pratt Institute, where she earned a master’s degree in library science. In 2014, she returned to the Hunts Point Library as its manager. After working in modern buildings, she was more conscious of the library’s shortcomings.

“It’s like that old, comfy couch,” she said. “You don’t want to get rid of it, but you know you need to update it.”