

April 4, 2021

Council President Hucker, Council Members:

I am writing in support of the County Executive's FY 2022 budget proposal for our Montgomery County Public Libraries. According to American Library Association, 42% of residents gave public libraries an "A", ranking us at the top of local public services that included police and public safety, parks and recreation, public schools, social service, roads and mass transit, and local government efficiency. Marylanders told us that, next to public green space (parks), they ranked public libraries as the most desired community asset. (*Building strong and vibrant community*)

I am honored to be the Chairperson of the Montgomery County Library Board. As an avid reader and library advocate, I am overjoyed with the way in which library Director Anita Vassallo and her team transitioned to the new business model as a result of the Pandemic. The main objective has been to provide necessary programming and access to resources. We are grateful to her and the creativity she and the staff have exhibited to keep the library available. The response to the Pandemic has been effective, swift and brings a sense of normalcy for the community. My family has benefitted from the Holds to Go, Story time with Mr. Will Jawando and Library Lovers Kickoff event (Feb 2021) with Sonia de los Santos.

The libraries are critical to the community. It is the one of very few activities open to all residents regardless of income. Where online for-profit resources continue to create economic disparity, the library provides opportunity opening doors to, and for, the disenfranchised. Libraries also bring communities together in times of calamity or disaster and is a vital resource to all Montgomery County residents. We are appreciative that the Council has not cut the collection budget and believes in the importance of keeping libraries strong and accessible to all.

One thing that has been clearly demonstrated throughout this past year is the ability of libraries to transform. Again, and again, libraries identify needs in the communities and find ways to respond to those needs. The effects of the pandemic have proven that libraries are not irrelevant or obsolete, but essential to a thriving community. As one librarian stated, "In the face of closures and restricted services, I've realized fully that libraries are a lifeline for many. Some cannot go without a new book to read or film to watch. Some desperately need the computers, Internet, Wi-Fi, and technology services the library offers. Others deeply miss the social aspects and innate need to spend time in the library space." Whether in-person or online, the library is here for the citizens. In the new year, as in years past, this will continue to be true, no matter what we face.

Prior to the Pandemic, the libraries have played a role in the pilot initiated in Gaithersburg and Germantown with focus on early literacy for our preschool aged residents. This program was necessary pre-covid and even more relevant given virtual schooling in the past year. Given the negative impacts the Pandemic has had on children's academic, emotional and social well-being, this focus is even more important than before.

Lastly, libraries are important cornerstones of a healthy community. Libraries give people the opportunity to find jobs, explore medical research, experience new ideas, get lost in wonderful stories, while at the same time providing a sense of place for gathering. I am honored to support the libraries and hope that the FY 2022 budget will reflect the significance the library poses for our ever-changing community.

Thank you  
Sonja Roberts

Citations:

Building strong and vibrant community. (n.d.). Retrieved April 06, 2021, from  
<http://www.ala.org/tools/research/librariesmatter/category/building-strong-and-vibrant-community>