



March 23, 2023

The Honorable Ben Barnes
Chairman, House Appropriations Committee
Room 121 House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Dear Chairman Barnes and Members of the Committee:

I am the CEO of Baltimore County Public Library. I write in support of SB501, the Aging Infrastructure Improvement Grant Program for Libraries. This infusion of capital dollars into libraries during FY 2024 through 2029 - \$40 million for county public library systems and \$10 million for the Enoch Pratt Free Library - would be a game changer for the communities served by public libraries.

Baltimore County Public Library has 19 heavily used and well-loved facilities that are visited by nearly 2 million residents annually. The average age of our branches is 50 years old, with the oldest being over 200 years old. Aging facilities means outdated infrastructure systems that are increasingly challenging and costly to maintain. Further, our branches were built at a time when library service looked very different from today.

Today's libraries are community hubs that create opportunities for creativity, discovery, and play. They support students and lifelong learners, and provide dynamic spaces for all age groups. Our libraries strengthen the wealth and economic vitality of the community because they support job seekers and job creators, alike. Public libraries directly address digital inequity in their communities by loaning Wi-Fi Hotspots and Chromebooks so that people have reliable access to the Internet at home. Libraries strengthen democracy, encouraging a well-informed citizenry and facilitating civic engagement and thoughtful discourse. Our social workers on staff, tax assistance services, distribution of snacks and meals to kids facing food insecurity, and very successful *Lawyers in the Library* program are just some of the ways BCPL provides a lifeline to many. In short, public libraries support healthy and vibrant communities.

Eleven of BCPL's 19 facilities are in need of critical capital investment, to include renovation, expansion, and/or new construction. BCPL has several key capital projects in the pipeline over the coming years, to include Catonsville (Districts 44/44B), Woodlawn (Districts 44/44B), Essex (Districts 6/6), Lansdowne (Districts 44/44A), Towson (Districts 43/43B), Randallstown (Districts 10/10), and North Point (Districts 6/6) branches. The collective cost for all of these projects is roughly \$260 million.

BCPL, and all public libraries in the state, are fortunate to have access to the County Library Capital Grant Program to help with funding of capital projects. However, with just \$7.5 million available annually, it will take decades to meet the immediate needs of Maryland's public libraries. When you factor that in today's dollars, the average cost for a library renovation is around \$20 million and new construction starts at \$40 million, you can see that available funding for libraries is insufficient to address needs.

As Maryland moves forward from the devastating impacts of a global pandemic and related economic and educational losses, rejuvenating libraries in our communities must be part of that recovery. Libraries need healthy buildings and modern equipment to continue addressing the

challenges so many are facing. Communities need libraries to succeed and thrive. Investing in library facilities, therefore, is a direct investment in the communities that use them.

I strongly urge passage of SB501 so we can modernize, strengthen, and sustain our library infrastructure for today and tomorrow.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Best,



Sonia Alcántara-Antoine
CEO