

Testimony in support of SB501: Aging Infrastructure Capital Improvement Grant Program
Hearing before the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee
March 1, 2023
Submitted by Tonya Aikens, Howard County Library System President & CEO

Dear Chair Guzzone, Vice Chair Rosapepe, and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

I am writing to support SB 501: the Aging Infrastructure Capital Improvement Grant Program.

The Maryland State Library Agency (MSLA) has established procedures to receive requests and distribute State capital funding through the annual County Library Capital Grant Program. Since the inception of the grant program in FY 2008, the number of annual awards has varied from 20 to 4 projects, including all six branches in Howard County.

More than half of the 191 public library buildings in Maryland are more than 25 years old. Consequences of this aging infrastructure are: five buildings need a new roof, three facilities require alterations for ADA compliance, four libraries have HVAC systems that are at the end of their useful life, 26 buildings require technological upgrades in order to provide 21st century library services, 23 existing facilities require general renovation, and six buildings have been identified for replacement with a new structure. The total estimated cost of these projects is **\$424.38 million**.

With the escalation of construction costs, grant requests have become larger, thereby decreasing the number of projects/geographic diversity in the distribution of awards. Most libraries do not request or receive the entire amount of State funds for which they are eligible.

While the allocation of an additional \$40 million annually is more than five times the total allocation of \$7.5 million annually for the existing statewide program, it will not significantly increase the total number of projects being managed by the agency or require additional staff. Since requests are capped at two per system under the proposed legislation, the maximum number of requests could not exceed 48 projects. Smaller library systems may not be able to manage or match more than one project in a single fiscal year.

The agency anticipates fewer, but larger, requests under this proposed legislation since the minimum request is \$500,000. Under the current grant program, the minimum request is \$20,000.

Maryland is one state of 15 that provides funding for the construction of library buildings, and we are thankful for the State and local support for Maryland public libraries. However, there simply isn't enough funding to meet the infrastructure needs of libraries in every community.

During the 2021 session, the General Assembly increased the annual state funding mandate for the library grant program from \$5 million to \$7.5 million. But even at this level, it will take 20 years to meet the immediate needs of Maryland's libraries.

And while new libraries are a reason for celebration, the majority of grants are awarded to smaller, but critical, projects like the renovation of the Hampden Library in Baltimore City, which did not have a public restroom.

This funding would enable us to complete more robust upgrades to our oldest branches, exponentially increase the supply of borrowable technology and internet access, and dutifully ensure the staffing needed to meet community needs. Providing inclusive places to gather is a core principle of public libraries. We offer equitable access to educational advancement, economic opportunity, and lifeline services for all.

Let's build on Maryland's commitment to its residents so we can strengthen and sustain our library infrastructure for generations to come.

We urge you to support SB 501: the Aging Infrastructure Capital Improvement Grant Program and continuing to invest in our communities.

Sincerely,

Tonya Aikens,
President & CEO