



**HOWARD COUNTY
LIBRARY SYSTEM**

Learn. Grow. Connect.

**Howard County Council's Capital Budget Hearing
April 13, 2026**

Testimony in support of Howard County Library System

Rob Mentz

Howard County Library System Board of Trustees, Chair

Good evening Chair Jones, Vice Chair Rigby, and members of the County Council.

My name is Rob Mentz, and I am Chair of Howard County Library System's Board of Trustees. On behalf of the Board, thank you for the opportunity to speak this evening.

I am here to discuss why a new Central Library is essential—not only for library services, but also for advancing Howard County's goals around education, workforce readiness, and community connection.

County Executive Ball's FY27 Capital Budget rightly recognizes that capital investment in the library system is critical to lifelong learning. His proposal continues progress on the new Central Library at the Lakefront by leveraging previously approved and anticipated state and federal funds, allowing this work to move forward without additional local appropriations this year. This approach reflects strong momentum and shared leadership across the County.

At the same time, it is important to be clear about the challenge before us. Our current Central Branch—the building that should serve as the flagship of our system—is no longer able to meet the needs of a growing and evolving community.

Howard County Library System's strategic plan focuses on three priorities: preparing children for school success, providing teens with meaningful places to learn and belong, and supporting adults as they build skills and connections throughout their lives. The current Central Library limits progress in all three areas.

For our youngest learners, demand far outpaces capacity. Research shows that early language exposure is critical to later academic success. While 71 percent of Howard County students scored in the Established Skills level on Early Literacy, the disparities are stark. Sixty-two percentage of Black/African American students score in the Established Skills level on Early Literacy, followed by 46 percent of Hispanic/Latino students, 50 percent of students with economic disadvantages, 44 percent of students with disabilities, and 31 percent of students who are multilingual learners. Libraries are uniquely positioned to support all families before their children ever enter the school system. However, the Central Branch has only one small classroom for children's programming, and families are routinely turned away due to lack of space.

For teens, the situation is even more constrained. The current Central Library has no dedicated teen space. The small area we have been able to carve out is 81 percent smaller than the smallest teen space in any other branch. Teens need safe, welcoming environments to study, collaborate, and simply belong—and right now, our Central Library cannot provide that.

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For adults, the constraints continue. Unlike other branches that can host large community programs, author talks, and public forums, the Central Library lacks adequate meeting and event space. Our flagship location has fewer opportunities for community learning than any other branch in the system.

A new Central Library directly advances our strategic goals and the County's priorities. It creates space for early literacy, youth engagement, workforce development, and civic connection. It serves as one of the few truly inclusive public spaces—free, welcoming, and accessible to everyone, from babies to seniors.

To keep this project moving forward, we are requesting the approval of the County Executive's capital budget request for this new library.

Howard County has long believed that education is lifelong and that community spaces matter. A new Central Library is an investment in those values and in the future of our residents.

Thank you for your leadership and continued support.

Respectfully submitted,

Rob Mentz
Chair, Howard County Library System Board of Trustees



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Tonya Aikens

President & CEO, Howard County Library System

Good evening, Chair Jones, Vice Chair Rigby, and members of the County Council. My name is Tonya Aikens, and I serve as President and CEO of Howard County Library System. Thank you for your long-standing support and for the opportunity to be here tonight.

I want to begin by thanking you for your vote last December, which allowed the County to move forward with negotiations to acquire the site for the new Central Library at the Lakefront. We are sincerely grateful for your leadership and partnership. Because of that decision, our community can begin to see what is possible – not just for downtown Columbia, but for residents across the county and throughout the region.

There is a real sense of excitement and hope around this project. It reflects a shared vision - one that has drawn support at the state level and continues to bring people together around what a modern library can and should be. At its heart, this effort carries forward James Rouse's vision of a "city on a hill"— a place designed to foster connection, inclusion, and opportunity for all.

And in this moment, that vision matters deeply.

At a time when many people feel isolated or divided, libraries remain one of the few spaces where everyone is welcome – offering resources and opportunities for every person, every interest, and every stage of life. Every day, we see people of all backgrounds walk through our doors to find resources, build skills, connect with one another, or simply feel a sense of belonging. This is among the quiet, powerful roles libraries play in strengthening community.

And when communities invest in modern library facilities, the return is measurable. Across the country, library usage consistently increases when communities invest in updated, welcoming spaces. In one multi-year analysis of public libraries serving mid-sized populations, visits increased by more than 10 percent, circulation by over 13 percent, and program attendance by approximately 12 percent following periods of investment and improved access¹.

We are seeing similar momentum here in Maryland. In fiscal year 2024 alone, library visits increased by 8 percent statewide, program attendance rose by 18 percent, and overall programming grew by 15 percent – clear indicators that when facilities are accessible and responsive to community needs, people show up in growing numbers².

This is the return on investment: more people walking through the doors, more families attending programs, more materials being used, and more lives being impacted.

At the same time, we are working to meet those needs in a building that is increasingly challenged by its age. The current Central Branch is 45 years old and maintaining it requires significant and growing effort. Since January 2024, staff have submitted 722 facilities and maintenance requests— more than any other library branch – including 33 related to elevator issues alone.

Today, neither of the building’s two elevators are operational. One has been out of service since last summer, and the second since March 22. Library buildings are County owned and maintained, and County teams are actively working to address these issues, but repairs have been difficult due to the age of the equipment and the challenges in sourcing replacement parts.

The impact of this is very real. When elevators are not functioning, members of our community – especially those with mobility challenges – are unable to fully access second-floor services, programs, and resources – which include the adult non-fiction collection, Project Literacy classes and services, public computers, meeting and study spaces, and the Equity Resource Center and Collection. Staff must also adapt in ways that limit efficiency and reduce our ability to serve people as effectively as we want to and as effectively as our community deserves.

As we approach warmer months, ongoing HVAC issues add another layer of concern. Since 2024, there have been 143 HVAC-related work orders, and the branch has had to close five times due to unsafe building conditions. These are not just operational challenges – temperature extremes and high humidity affect our staff, our customers, and our collections.

All of this underscores a simple but important point: while County staff are doing all they can to maintain the current facility, it is increasingly difficult to meet the expectations and needs of our growing community within the building’s limitations.

These are among the key reasons why continued progress on the new Central Library is so important. It is not only about a new building – it is about ensuring reliable access, welcoming spaces, and the ability to serve our community with excellence for decades to come.

So tonight, I respectfully ask for your continued support by approving the County Executive’s proposed capital budget for FY27. This investment is an investment in people – in access, in opportunity, and in the long-term strength of our community. It will allow us to deliver the level of service that Howard County residents rely on and deserve.

Thank you for your time, your leadership, and your commitment to our community.

Respectfully submitted,

Tonya Aikens

1. Colorado Library Research Service (LRS)

Colorado State Library, Library Research Service. *The Impact of the Recession on Public Library Use in Colorado.*

<https://www.lrs.org/fast-facts-reports/the-impact-of-the-recession-on-public-library-use-in-colorado/>

2. Maryland State Library Resource Center (SLRC)

Maryland State Library Resource Center. *Maryland Public Library Statistics, FY 2024.*

<https://www.slrc.info/assets/documents/Maryland-Public-Library-Statistics-FY-2024.pdf>