

FY '09 Free Library General Fund Budget Testimony

President Anna Verna and members of City Council:

I am Amy Dougherty, Executive Director of the Friends of the Free Library of Philadelphia, Inc. As you may recall, the Friends of the Free Library of Philadelphia, Inc. is an independent non-profit organization whose mission is to support the Free Library of Philadelphia. Through affiliate neighborhood volunteer groups, we promote cooperation and communication between the community and the Free Library and advocate for library services for all adults and children.

I want to acknowledge those of you who have given your time to meet with me in the last few weeks and to thank all of you for the opportunity to speak with you today about library services and resources.

Library Friends Groups in neighborhoods all across this city routinely boost their local libraries in many active ways. In particular, they raise money for books and other materials and programs by holding bake sales, book sales, flea and craft markets, bingo events, and more. Library Friends are out there, doing their part. We now ask you to help us – adults and children, students at every academic level, folks needing assistance with job preparedness and applications, Philadelphians in every neighborhood.

On behalf of our 43 active affiliate Friends Groups and library patrons across the city, I want today to let you know that we appreciate and value the basic level of services at the 53 library branches. We have, however, some concerns about the library allocation in the proposed FY '09 General Fund budget.

More specifically, a review of Mayor Nutter's comprehensive five-year plan suggests that the Free Library system is not and will not be utilized as fully as it could. The Free Library can, given appropriate resources, lead the way to positive social and economic change in Philadelphia. Every day we hear from constituents who are demanding updated materials and relevant programs at their libraries. In no way to diminish the traditional offerings of the library, such as entertainment, literature, and arts and culture, our constituents constantly ask their libraries to offer resources that help them to help themselves. They want programs that lift their educational and economic level.

Helping our citizens lift themselves requires leadership, commitment, and coordination on the part of city officials, as well as dollars. We can do it, but not by cutting the library budget.

The Free Library's FY '09 General Fund budget is \$40,245,065. This represents a 1% reduction of \$403,000 from the current 2008 allocation. Of the proposed reductions \$189,000 is from class one, or staffing, and is a result of administrative 'efficiencies' so that library branches' hours (5.5 days, or full days Monday – Friday and half day on Saturdays) will not be affected. \$100,000 is slated to be cut from the purchase of contracted services due to a reduction in the price of library computer leases. Those cuts make administrative and service sense.

Far more troubling is the \$114,000 slated to be cut from the materials line – this refers to all that you expect to have available when you visit your library including books, DVDs, periodicals, videos, software, etc. This allocation has been flat for the past seven years. The acquisition of materials, therefore, has not kept pace with inflation or the standard of living but instead, has significantly reduced the Free Library's purchasing power for library materials across the board, year after year. We are requesting that you not cut the materials budget, but instead increase the FY '08 level for materials which is \$3,931,643 by 10% for a total of \$4,324,800 in FY '09. In this way, every library location, not just a select few, can be equipped with sufficient materials for children and adults.

There is, in addition, the urgent matter of programmatic resources. We understand that the city faces pressing fiscal demands resulting from our social challenges. Ours is a city rife with school drop-outs, unemployment, illiteracy, crime, families living in poverty, a bloated prison population, and 50% of our residents without home computers. The need, therefore, for basic reading and computer literacy and progressive work-force development programs is more imperative than ever.

An examination of programmatic shortages demonstrates that fiscal stringencies result in missed opportunities, and even waste. As just one example, let me tell you about Gates Computer Labs in three library branches – Kensington, West Oak Lane and Lillian Marrero, with three more expected this year. These labs are equipped with their own computers, a dozen of them for each lab, for computer skills training purposes. However, due to the absence of program dollars, translated into trainers and marketing, these labs more often than not sit idle. This is but one puzzling and frustrating example of missed opportunities that I witness in my travels among the 53 Free Library branches.

I believe that we can and must do better by setting aside dollars for programs that help all citizens to reach their full potential as we transition from a manufacturing economy to one that is knowledge based. The time is now to supply the dedicated resources so that library staff can deliver needed services to your constituents. We estimate that an additional \$1 million dedicated to computer training and job readiness programming would be a good start.

All together, we are requesting a total increase of \$1,393,164 to the proposed FY '09 library budget: \$393,164 to be dedicated for materials and \$1 million for targeted workforce programs so that we can take the first steps in continuing to support the library system as an agency that helps Philadelphians not merely sustain, but succeed and, indeed, thrive.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Amy Dougherty
Friends of the Free Library of Philadelphia
www.libraryfriends.info
215.567.4562