

How The Library's Budget Serves You

A Letter From Library Director, Jessica McGrath

After learning of some Natchitoches Parish Council members' intention to rededicate library millage approved by voters in 2017, I attended the November Council meeting so that the library could be involved in the conversation. Despite every effort made on my and the Library Board of Control's part, no one advocating for the rededication reached out. In the following weeks, I learned the actual resolution to rededicate library millage would be discussed at the December meeting. Being unable to obtain a copy of the resolution to be presented and having not been contacted for information, I attended the meeting prepared to give a brief explanation of the library's budget, both where it comes from and our plans for it; and to tell everyone why I believe in what our public library is doing for our Parish. I also thought this would be a good time to share all of this information with you, the public we serve.

First, let me explain what many detractors are getting hung up on. Yes, our library does have a budget surplus. While this might be uncommon in Natchitoches Parish, did you know that many cities and Parishes in our state require that their departments have at least a full year's budget amount in reserves? This "forward funding" gives them the ability to pay for the current year's projects with last year's money. The library has elected to forward fund its budget, thereby avoiding debt and reducing risk, while also not placing any extra burden on taxpayers.

In just the past two years, our forward-funded budgeting has allowed us to build a meeting room at the Northeast Branch and replace the HVAC system and roof at the Main Branch. Also, going a little further back to 2016, we completed construction on and opened the Northeast Branch in Campti. All of this was done without incurring debt or spending more than was already in the bank. Our next planned expense is replacing the Bookmobile to better service the schools and children of our parish; again, without spending anything beyond what has been saved for that purpose. From our perspective, this is very important as we seek to responsibly fund the goals and initiatives outlined in the library's Strategic Plan (available in full on our website at natlib.org). The Library Board of Control has been working according to this document since the early 2000's library millage renewal (which was last voted on and approved in 2017) to deliver on the promised goal of full library services and programs to all citizens via multiple branches as well as bookmobile and outreach services. 97% of our budget comes from this dedicated property tax, but an exact amount is never guaranteed. The library does not take money from other Parish funds in any way; in fact, we help offset some of our shared administrative costs.

To see how this works out in practice, the average homeowner, with a home valued at \$150,000, pays about \$60 a year in property taxes toward the library's operation. That's less than one cup of coffee a month at a coffee shop. So, what does that cup of coffee get your community? For those that haven't stepped into our local library in a while, you are in for a surprise!

The library turns the average taxpayer's \$5 a month into access to:

- Shelves of books, movies, magazines, and newspapers;
- Digital content including eBooks, audiobooks, movies, TV shows, music, magazines, and graphic novels;
- Portable WiFi and laptop checkout;
- Computer labs with Microsoft Office Suite;
- Delivery of library materials to elderly and homebound patrons;

- Educational and fun summer reading program performances;
- Arts and craft classes for children, teens, and adults;
- Monthly fitness classes;
- Meeting and Study Room reservations;
- Learning and activity tablets preloaded with age-appropriate content;
- Live online tutors 7 days a week, from 2 PM to midnight;
- Online video courses for professional development;
- Learning software for 163 languages;
- Online car repair manuals and diagrams;
- Genealogical research sites;
- Consumer Reports;
- Educational classes from community experts and library staff;
- Fun family-friendly outings, such as outdoor movies and music performances;
- Resume writing and job application assistance;
- Weekly story times and activities;
- A safe space for people of all ages and backgrounds to gather, read, explore, and learn;

And that's not an exhaustive list!

"But everything is online nowadays."

I hear this and similar statements, often as attempts to downplay the relevance of a public library. Firstly, not everyone in the parish can afford or even physically get a connection. Secondly, while you can find a lot of information online, not all of it is free, and good luck wading through it all to determine its quality and accuracy. I understand the convenience of using Google, but I also know that if I wanted to learn a new language, dig into my family's genealogy, learn in-demand skills through video courses, or compare the latest products through Consumer Reports, I would have to pay a subscription for each of these without my library. Plus, the library has the added benefit of having a real person (library staff) for assistance.

Our library staff, myself included, are out serving our community regularly. Sometimes it's at schools: showing teachers how to access the digital checkout services we provide to all students via SORA; in an NSU classroom sharing how to take free PRAXIS and NCLEX practice tests through Learning Express; hosting a book club for middle or high school students; or speaking with a group of high schoolers about how they can access self-paced coding classes via Linked-In Learning. Other times you might find us participating in your neighborhood's National Night Out, fall carnival, health fair, or a local festival so that we can share about library resources. Or, we might be delivering library materials to, and hosting services for, those who cannot come to us.

I agree, our Parish roads are in need of repair (I live on one, so I empathize with this sentiment). But, I also know that reducing the library's funding is not going to solve this problem or even put a band-aid on it. It would only serve to cripple library facilities, services, and programs – the same facilities, services, and programs that make our community a place of growth and that people depend on.

The library is about service. It is about helping people find information and enjoyment in life. It is about economic development. And it is about bringing people together. To paraphrase Albus Dumbledore, "Help will always be given to those that seek it;" and I feel that our library is a special place that I can say

that about with 100% sincerity. I hope you too can see the value of your local library to our community and yourself personally. I encourage you to visit us in person and follow us on social media so you can join us in enriching our community.

-In knowledge, connection, and community,
Jessica McGrath, NPL Director

- outreach.jpg: McGrath tells NSU Education students about NPL resources that are helpful in their current studies as well as when they are teachers in the future.
- lifelong learning.jpg: The NPL offers materials and services covering such a wide range of interests that you are sure to find something useful to you. And if you don't yet have a card, all you have to do is text us to get one! We will email you your info for online access and mail your physical card to your home.