

Director's Report for January 25, 2024

Williams and Main Remodeling Update: The Williams remodeling is moving along smoothly. Things there are on schedule for a Grand Reopening in April. You can [view updated photos on the CALS blog](#). The Main remodel is a different picture. The demolition has been slow to get underway and the architects and contractor are still working to get the project within our budget. These delays are frustrating our original planned reopening date for some time in the first quarter of 2025. When I asked the architects and contractors to give me an update on scheduling earlier this week here is what they told me:

- 1) Begin Phase 1 Architectural Demo 2/12/2024 -Demobilize Phase 1 Architectural Demo 6/19/2024
 - 2) Finish design drawings by 2/6/2024
 - 3) Begin 100% Construction 3/25/2024
 - 4) Parking Lot New Entrance 4/1/2024
 - 5) Complete construction 12 to 14 months later depending on full scope.
- Based on this adjusted timeline Main will not be ready to reopen until sometime in the 2nd or 3rd Quarter of 2025.

Strategic Planning: In mid-2019, the CALS board adopted a three-year strategic plan. This was the first time CALS had done any formal strategic planning since the 1980s. The process afforded us a chance to communicate with community leaders and patrons about their views of the library and what they would like to see change as areas of emphasis in the future. The process took about 9 months and yielded a straightforward and relatively brief plan. It would be difficult to overstate the value we realized from this tool for budgeting and setting programming priorities in the period after it was adopted. Despite the interruption of the pandemic, we made great strides in achieving most of the goals set out in that plan 4 years ago.

The administration is certain that leading CALS over the next 3-5 years will be easier if we update the strategic plan. We are also convinced that it is better to hire an outside consultant to guide this exercise again rather than trying to do it all in-house. We surveyed several libraries around the country to gather names of strategic planning consultants other libraries had used over the last year or two. Carol Coffey, our data manager, will be the point person on staff for the planning. She has interviewed individuals recommended to us and identified a firm of experienced professionals who can guide us in this process. **Stephanie Chase** is the founding principal of the firm based in Oregon known as Constructive Disruption. She has 25 years of executive level experience in public libraries in both rural and urban settings. Stephanie will join us virtually Thursday to go over what she and her firm are proposing and let you pose questions. We would like the board to determine if we should engage Constructive Disruption to lead the process for us over the next year or so. Carol and Jo can report on their findings about the costs of this firm and others we talked to about our project.

Development: In 2024, we are continuing to focus on planning for the capital campaign for the Main Library. We expect to bring together our capital campaign committee soon for a kickoff meeting and training. We are currently working to develop a “menu” of naming opportunities associated with the transformed Main Library. In the next few weeks, expect to see a proposed

“menu” and a revised naming policy for your review and approval. (The current policy is [here](#); it does not adequately address philanthropic naming.)

The last six weeks of 2023 were busy with fundraising for the CALS Foundation’s year-end campaign. For the second year in a row, we managed the campaign in-house (rather than contracting with an agency) and it was a success. We received a total of \$97,537.76 in year-end donations and beat the CALS Foundation’s goal for budgeted unrestricted donations for 2023.

On December 21, we filed the Articles of Dissolution for Friends of CALS, following the membership vote to dissolve the organization. As reported at the last board meeting, Used Book Sales will continue; we are planning the next one at the Port for March 7-9, 2024.

Right before Christmas we received some unfortunate news from AmeriCorps; because of significant budget cuts within the program, AmeriCorps is unable to support the placement of any additional standard members (meaning members whose living allowances are paid in full by AmeriCorps) in Arkansas in the coming year. For CALS, this means that we will not be hosting AmeriCorps VISTAs for Be Mighty or Count Up. Our Rock It! Lab VISTA will continue to serve out her term that ends in November. Essentially, there are a finite number of AmeriCorps positions that the program can support within the state and region, and by December they had already met that quota for the 2024 fiscal year. It was a much lower threshold this year due to the recent living allowance increase, as well as higher rates of reenrollment and the reduced budget after the Fiscal Responsibility Act rescinded ARP funding. This is obviously disappointing news since AmeriCorps service members have made many important contributions to CALS over the years. CALS leadership is working with the affected programs to ensure they are adequately staffed despite losing service members this year.

Circulation and Traffic: In 2023, for the first time, CALS patrons checked out over 1 million digital items (eBooks, audiobooks, magazines, videos, music). OverDrive (eBooks and audiobooks) accounted for more than 800,000 of those checkouts while Freegal accounted for about 196,000. Ebooks were the most popular format, with audiobooks close behind. CALS has always been slightly behind the curve, continuing to circulate more physical items than digital, in contrast to many other public libraries. That seems to be changing, driven in part by the pandemic but also by the increased collection budget that enables the collection managers to buy more copies of popular titles in OverDrive, which in turn decreases the wait time for those titles. As I noted here in September, the average wait time for an OverDrive hold to become available for a CALS patron is currently 13 days. Some of our peer libraries have wait times of 30 to 50 days.

Physical circulation continues to trend down. In 2023, physical circulation totals were about 70% of what they were in 2019, the last full year before the pandemic. Door counts in 2023 were about 62% of the 2019 counts. This may be at least partially attributable to the new people counters we installed at all locations in the fall of 2022. Those counters work differently and make it difficult to compare the numbers. The temporary closures of Main and Williams libraries caused a noticeable drop in door count in the last few months of the year. It is likely that we would have gained more ground if we had not needed to close those locations for renovations.

We don't expect to continue comparing usage numbers to their 2019 counterparts for much longer as the older numbers become less relevant to our current situation.

Communications: We've rescheduled the Main Library Wall Breaking for Tuesday, February 6, at 11:00 a.m. If you're interested in attending, please email us at communications@cals.org.

We're planning a weekend celebration for the Williams Library Grand Reopening that includes a special "Family Dinner Night" and ribbon-cutting ceremony. Family Dinner Night, a twist on an existing Williams Library program, will take place on Friday, April 12, at 7 p.m. The event will include a taste of the neighborhood with food from nearby local restaurants, drinks, and music and offer a first look at the renovated library. Tickets will be \$75 per person and be available on the CALS website next month. Proceeds from this event will support Williams Library programming. On Saturday, April 13, 10 a.m.-2 p.m., we'll host the Ribbon Cutting and Block Party. The free community block party will reintroduce the library to the community with tours, demonstrations, music, and food trucks.

Proposed Sale of the Building Next to Main: The owner of the building that faces Clinton Ave. and backs up to the library notified me by email last weekend that he has an offer to buy the building. Under the terms of an agreement CALS entered in February of 2015 to lease a part of that building, CALS has a right of first refusal to purchase the building. We need to engage a local lawyer to review this transaction to determine its possible implications for CALS before we waive our right to purchase the building. One question is whether the original obligation of CALS to lease the space in the building for 40 years (31 years of this term remain) survives the conveyance to the buyer. To help us understand our obligations we would like to engage Scott Schallhorn at the firm of Mitchell Williams. I have known Scott for over 35 years. He has an excellent reputation in the local bar as a real estate and corporate transaction lawyer. In recommending the library hire Scott, I need to disclose that my son is an associate at this firm but Nathan Coulter will not be involved in the representation of CALS or receive any benefit personally from the engagement of Mr. Schallhorn.

Act 372 Litigation Update: The defendants took a deposition of the Crawford County plaintiff in December. Otherwise there has been no recent activity in the case. I requested from John Adams an idea of the additional attorneys fees that we might incur to get the case concluded in the U.S. District Court and briefed for the appeal in the Eighth Circuit sometime in the second half of this year. He has estimated \$30,000. We will continue to raise funds from donors to cover this. Fortunately, earlier this month we received a commitment from a donor to give matching funds of up to \$15,000 to pay the fees this year, leaving us with the responsibility of raising the other half.

New Board Members: We are excited to welcome three new board members this month. The new Pulaski County representative is **Joyce Elliott**. Joyce is a former teacher in the PCSSD and served in the Arkansas General Assembly for 20 years. Perry County's new representative is **David Finkbeiner**. David works for Children's Hospital in IT. He and his wife have three children in the Perryville Public Schools and they are all frequent users of Milam Library. Little Rock's newest board member is **Karama Neal**. She served very briefly on the board in 2021 before a job with the federal government necessitated her early retirement from the board; you may have seen her onstage expertly engaging author Christian Cooper in conversation at the

book festival in September. All three of them participated in the new board member orientation session we had last week. There they got a chance to meet several current board members (Thanks for joining that!) and some of the CALS staff. Welcome to the Board!!

Officers for 2024: All three of last year's board officers, Stacey McAdoo, Ryan Davis, and Brandon Grice, have agreed to serve another year as President, Vice President, and Treasurer, respectively. The board will need to elect (and thank!) them at the meeting.