

## Director's Report for January 23, 2025

**Main Remodeling:** I walked through the building last week to give a tour to the members of the Little Rock Engineers Club who had asked me to speak at their monthly meeting about the renovation project. Matthew Lehner from CDI accompanied me and offered some interesting details. He highlighted a few things that might be of interest to non-engineers, too. For example, he pointed out that the new piers needed to support the new stairway and entrance on the east side go down about two stories below the surface to rest on the same subterranean rock that anchors the original building. This ensures that the entire building settles at the same pace. He also explained the new technology being used to add to the load bearing capacity of the roof without having to install more rebar: a lot of sponge-like cable unspoiled to adhere to the top and bottom of the existing concrete. Matthew will be at the meeting to answer questions again if anyone is interested in this or other aspects of the work being done to reopen this year. Here he is showing the engineers the opening where the monumental stairs were on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor (left) and the raised ceiling on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor that will enhance the new Darragh Center.



**Hillcrest Hall Sale Proceeds:** When CALS sold Hillcrest Hall in late 2022, we placed the proceeds, approximately \$540, in reserve. Last month we discussed at the board meeting using these funds to cover the aspects of Main's renovation that had to be pushed to Phase 2 when we were trying last year to cut costs to get within budget. The bulk of these items that we had to cut out involved fully appointing and updating the Children's Programming Center on the first floor. The contractor estimates that to do this will cost approximately \$419K beyond the original project, provided that CDI initiates this work now to take advantage of efficiencies from already being on site. The architects, contractor, and Jo will walk us through the details at the meeting so you can determine if you want to apply these Hillcrest Hall funds to Phase 2.

**Pigeon Patrol:** In her capacity as Director of Special Projects, Pam Bandy has identified two possible paths we might pursue to address this. One involves a plan to modify the exposed I-Beams by covering them with sheet metal. The other is to contract with a firm out of Dallas that installs cables with a low amp energy that discourages the birds from lighting on the beams. Polk Stanley Wilcox has been working on a third option, another possible modification to the exterior. In the meantime, a large volume of pigeon droppings collects all along the north and west sides of the Roberts Library. Gonzalo's staff is currently washing it 2 times a week. Pam is waiting to

hear back from PSW before we make any recommendations. Whatever we do will be expensive but necessary since, in Pam's words, all of the "Ace Hardware DIY options" have been unsuccessful.

**Nonresident Library Cards:** Last month I mentioned the need to review and possibly update our fees for nonresident cards. It has been \$54/yr since we established the charge in early 2020. Here is the applicable part of Policy 401 that the board adopted five years ago this month: *"Those living outside of the CALS taxing area may obtain a library card by paying a non-resident fee in an amount set by the Executive Director and determined by a periodic estimation of the approximate amount of library taxes paid by the average property owner in the CALS service area."* Using a formula Jo derived to determine this average in 2020 (based on 2018 collection numbers), we set the annual rate at \$54 rate. Using that same formula, the adjusted number now would be \$74 (based on 2024 collections). A significant part of that is attributable to the half mill increase in property taxes dedicated to library operations that LR voters approved in 2021. The remainder of this increase under the formula to determine the average millage paid comes from an appreciation in the value of properties in the service area over the last 7 years.

Asking nonresidents who want to use CALS resources to contribute roughly what they might pay in taxes to the library if they lived in the service area seemed fairer to our taxpayers. To honor that continuing objective, we will raise the nonresident card fees to \$72. Rounding the amount down \$2 to a number that is divisible by 12 will simplify matters for our staff when helping with those non-residents who need to pay in monthly installments.

Somewhat related to this is the struggle many of our patrons encounter when they are trying to check out Hoopla content. Libraries are charged a fee by Hoopla for each item that patrons check out. Prices vary but each checkout costs around \$2.05 in fees to Hoopla. To keep us within our annual Hoopla budget, CALS must set a daily budget cap. Once the library's cost reaches our daily budget cap, patrons are unable to check out any more Hoopla items until midnight the next day. We usually hit our cap very early in the morning, often before most patrons wake up. Kate and Leslie will keep looking for ways to overcome this frustration for our patrons. CALS is not alone; libraries across the country are struggling with this issue.

**Strategic Planning:** We are continuing to gather community feedback, but some general concepts are starting to emerge from the research and data gathering that has happened so far. Those concepts are currently being considered by various staff groups, including the Staff Planning Team (SPT) and the Administrative Council. The SPT plans to meet for an all-day retreat in February to develop those concepts into the first draft of the strategic plan document.

**Program Updates:** 2024 wrapped up with some fun holiday programming including a Noon Year's Eve party at the Children's Library & Learning Center that is becoming a popular tradition.



Looking ahead to February, we are excited to present several programs and events in celebration of Black History Month. The 3<sup>rd</sup> annual CALS Black Family Expo will be Saturday, February 1 from 11 am to 2 pm at the Dunbar Community Center. This is a new venue for the event that will give us some room to grow. We will be kicking off the 2025 Distinguished Lecture Series with Victoria Christopher Murray, bestselling co-author of *The Personal Librarian* and *The First Ladies* whose new historical novel *Harlem Rhapsody* tells the story of Jessie Redmon Fauset who helped ignite the Harlem Renaissance. The author will join us for a moderated discussion and book signing on February 27 at 6:30 in Ron Robinson Theater. To reserve your seat, register to attend the program here: <https://events.cals.org/event/12824693>

The Six Bridges Book Festival Talent Committee is gearing up for this year's festival with their first meeting happening this evening. We look forward to working with this group of passionate volunteers to recruit another excellent slate of authors for the 2025 festival.

**Development:** The development team wrapped up 2024 celebrating a successful year in fundraising. We are proud of several achievements from the last year, including two well attended fundraising events (Williams Family Dinner on April 18 and An Evening with Ann Patchett and Robin Preiss Glasser on September 29) and multiple five- and six-figure grant approvals. We're also proud we launched our "Next Chapter" capital campaign for the Main Library and fully transitioned the CALS Used Book Sale from the Main Library basement to the Port. It was a busy year, and the development team worked closely with many CALS colleagues in all areas of fundraising – especially the communications and finance teams and all the programmers who make it easy for funders to say "yes" to supporting CALS.

In 2024 the CALS Foundation earned more than \$2M in revenue (including grants, contributions, and investment income). Most of that was restricted to specific programs or projects, though we did beat our goal of raising \$135,000 in unrestricted gifts to fund the CALS Foundation's operational budget (we met the goal on December 31, ultimately raising \$139,434). Most of those unrestricted gifts were raised through our year-end fundraising campaign, which ran from Giving Tuesday in November 'til December 31. That money is what allows the CALS Foundation to make grants to library programs throughout the year: \$25,000 to children's programming; \$5,000 each to Six Bridges Book Festival, Rock It! Lab, Count Up, library

gardens, Encyclopedia of Arkansas, Be Mighty; and other initiatives. We are grateful to the hundreds of donors who made gifts large and small in 2024 to support their library. We often say that while fundraising revenue makes up a small slice of the pie of CALS's overall revenue, it's impact is disproportionate, making a meaningful difference for marquee programs like Summer@CALs and Six Bridges Book Festival. Finally, we are soliciting sponsors of 2025 programs. We'll have copies of our new sponsor brochure at the meeting.

**Capital Campaign for Main:** We ended the year with \$886,000 in pledges and gifts to our "Next Chapter" capital campaign. And, we currently have grant requests and other fundraising appeals outstanding that total more than \$2.5M.

**Used Book Sale:** The CALS Used Book Sale program earned more than \$80,000 in 2024. The next Used Book Sale falls on Valentine's Day weekend at 7773 Sloane Drive in Little Rock. Please come shop and invite your friends (and Valentine's Day dates): **Thursday, February 13: 2-5pm; Friday, February 14: 10am-2pm; and Saturday, February 15: 10am-2pm**

**Communications:** We had a number of marketing successes last year, thanks to concerted efforts. Highlights included a literal wall-breaking event, a trio of celebrations for the reopening of the Williams Library, representation on a PLA conference panel, anniversary programs for Fletcher and McMath, and the rollout of the CALS Cruiser. Now, just a few weeks into 2025, we're focusing on promoting Black History Month and beginning the planning process for the reopening of the Main Library this fall. As part of this effort, we'll establish committees that include stakeholders from various organizations, volunteers, and board members. We hope that some of you will share your talents and ideas with us.

**Circulation and Traffic:** I have some preliminary numbers to report from our 2024 usage. We saw growth in several of the primary usage metrics that we track on a regular basis. Digital circulation was slightly more than 50% of total circulation for the first time since 2020. Total digital circulation was a little over 1.2 million with the majority of that number coming from OverDrive. We barely missed getting 1 million OverDrive checkouts in 2024 but expect to hit that target in 2025. The total number of library cards issued rose by 20% in 2024. That number does not include the Tech Cards issued to students. Program attendance rose by 22%, driven by an 8% increase in the number of programs presented. The rise in program attendance is likely one of the factors contributing to the 6% increase in library visits (door counts). That seems like a good return on the investment of time staff members put into programming.

We did see some losses in several areas. Physical circulation continued to decline, as did computer and laptop usage. Other libraries across the country have also reported lower numbers of computer usage, possibly because more people have their own devices. Wi-Fi sessions are down, but some of that decrease is probably attributable to the continued closure of Main Library. Since all of these are preliminary numbers, some of this will change slightly as Carol Coffey analyzes the data and corrects errors in preparation for the annual report and State Library Statistical Survey, but those changes should be small.

**Revisions to Review Process for Expenditures:** Last month, I reported on an event at McMath on November 8 that was the result of our advertising agency's recommendation that we bring in

the Razorback quarterback to highlight the library's resources and encourage library card signups. About 250 people turned out and library card signups in November rose by 49% compared to the same month a year earlier (744 in 2023/1107 in 2024). The campaign continued through December, which saw a 29% increase in card registrations (734 in 2023/947 in 2024). Besides the uptick in cards, the signing event conveyed a message to kids that sports and books go hand in hand, leaving many with a memorable experience.

The campaign was an ambitious undertaking. As with any campaign or program, we've evaluated the results in a typical cost/benefit analysis so we can determine the utility of the campaign to guide future marketing campaigns. This campaign's expense, totaling \$50,000, was a significant investment and an outlier for us. A [January 6 story](#) in the ADG about the campaign evoked understandable questions among a number of our friends, library donors, and CALS employees. The report highlighted the costs associated with Taylen Green's participation, our existing agreement with the agency, and travel expenses.

I commend the marketing department under Tameka's leadership for their enthusiasm in telling the CALS story every day to the wider community, and for their creativity in looking to find new ways, like this one, to engage with people, particularly children and teens, who may not have had as many opportunities to enjoy the library. I always want to encourage innovation, but my higher priority is to safeguard CAL's longstanding and well-deserved reputation for prudent stewardship of taxpayer funds. I recognize that our decision to spend this much money on this particular program caused some of our friends and supporters to lose confidence in CALS's thriftiness. I will do better to uphold CALS's reputation of good stewardship with public funds

When I okayed the idea the ad firm presented to Tameka with apparently some sense of urgency in late September, I didn't know that the firm wanted CALS to pay nearly \$25,000 to cover the fees and travel expenses for the athlete. When I learned the cost of the promotion on the eve of the McMath event, I immediately regretted that I had not asked for more information when this was presented to me. I agonized more when I learned later that Jo had not been aware of this specific outlay. She and I will implement a better process going forward so we can make certain that for large expenditures like this one we've engaged in sufficient discussion and consideration of all the implications before moving forward.

**Staff Update:** Our new Human Resources Manager will be introduced at the meeting. **Priscilla Barnes** has a great resume for an HR professional, and we are all very pleased to have her join CALS.

**New Board Member:** The Sherwood City Council and Mayor have appointed our recently retired Sanders Library Manager **Ginann Swindle** to the CALS Board. She succeeds Brandon Grice who was not eligible for another term. Ginann worked for CALS for 29 years! She arrives knowing more about CALS than any other new board member since I have been at CALS. She is joining a board that fortunately will continue to have **Ryan Davis** and **Madhav Shroff** on it. Little Rock's City Board and Mayor reappointed Ryan and Madhav to new three-year terms.

**Next Board Meeting:** Our next meeting will be at noon on **February 27, 2025**, at the Dee Brown Library.