

Director's Report for February 22, 2024

Remodeling Updates: We had a very good turnout for the wall-breaking on February 6 to celebrate the start of demolition at Main. The mayor attended and spoke about his enthusiasm for the future at CALS and its role in the growth of cultural amenities in downtown Little Rock. Several of you were there but here's the link to CALS [YouTube channel to the video](#) our staff shot. We received positive responses on social media and the story was covered by several news outlets: [Arkansas Democrat-Gazette](#), [Arkansas Money & Politics](#), [Little Rock Public Radio](#), and [Arkansas Times](#). It's encouraging now to see the CDI demolition crew taking things outside to the several large dumpsters they are filling up to make way for construction efforts that will follow. CDI has set a deadline of February 27 for all subcontractors to turn in their bids. CDI estimates it will be ready by March 6 to present final pricing to the architects and the information will be presented to CALS about a week later. I'm keeping my fingers crossed.

Also on February 6, the City of LR Board of Directors approved our request to close a portion of Rock Street immediately in front of CALS to vehicular traffic so we can incorporate that space into the landscape design as part of the remodel of Main. Scott Schallhorn, attorney for CALS, and I attended that board meeting. The following week the Little Rock Board of Adjustments met on February 15 to consider a handful of variances our architects had requested to enable the changes they have designed, particularly with the rooftop signage and open-air programming space there. All four BOA members in attendance approved the requested variances following a discussion of the project and how it related to the specific variances.

The Williams remodel is moving along according to plan and within budget. Clarke Contractors has set a completion date of April 8. The grand reopening celebration has been rescheduled due to delays caused by the inclement weather last month. The events will now take place over three days: Family Dinner Night on Thursday, April 18; Ribbon Cutting on Friday, April 19; and the Block Party on Saturday, May 4. We anticipate tickets going on sale next week. Gonzalo and his team are getting ready to start working on the Terry branch makeover using some of the capital funds. In addition to Terry, McMath and Dee Brown are also scheduled for makeovers in 2024. CALS has retained Kate East as the interior designer on the branch projects. Kate is with AMR architects, the firm doing the Williams remodel. Kate met with Terry staff last week to go over color and flooring choices. Gonzalo estimates that the Terry work will start in mid-March.

Update on CALS Network Disruption: Our IT staff and the outside experts we have retained in the days following the breach worked tirelessly and as a result we were back online about noon Tuesday. While the 14-day disruption of the internet is over the work continues to determine whether any CALS' files were stolen. So far, we have no indication that there has been any loss. We keep very little of our patrons' personal information – just addresses and names. We do of course have more sensitive information for employees but almost all of that is stored in the cloud where it is safeguarded by third parties and off our network. I have assured staff that we are keenly aware of their privacy concerns. I have asked them to be vigilant with their online accounts and to let us know immediately if they see any evidence of unauthorized or irregular activity so we can help them deal with that appropriately. The [ADG reported the network disruption](#) late last week. This prompted a [couple of local TV stations](#) to inquire and run stories on air. [Wednesday's paper](#) had the report on our restoring the internet.

In addition, I can share with you that our experts believe that the source of the attack was an organization known as Lockbit that has struck more than 1700 organizations in the U.S. since it was first identified in 2020. *Reuters News* reported earlier this week that an international law enforcement operation had disrupted Lockbit's operation for now by seizing its darkweb site where Lockbit posts stolen data if their extortion demands are ignored.

<https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/19/politics/fbi-ransomware-lockbit-dark-web-site/index.html>

Strategic Planning: The lead consultant with the firm the board authorized us to hire has sent us a graph that visually reflects the timeline for their work, which will be shared on screen with the board during the meeting. Carol Coffey will update us at the meeting on the progress of this effort and plans to involve the board going forward.

Development: Preparation for our capital campaign continues. The campaign committee convened on February 19 to review our case statement and complete solicitation training before approaching donors to support the transformation of Main. Your approval of revisions to the naming policy will be an important step in this process.

One of our goals this year has been to identify a new funding source for Count Up (CALS's popular free math tutoring program). As many of you know, the program started with a 2020 grant from Walton Personal Philanthropy Group and has been sustained from 2021-2024 with federal funds granted through the ARP ESSER III program. However, ESSER funding will sunset in August 2024, so CALS must either absorb the program expenses in the general budget or seek additional funders. (The library's 2024 budget does assume that CALS will absorb program costs for the second half of this year, though the development staff has continued to work to identify other funding possibilities.) In December 2023, we replied to two RFPs posted by the City of Little Rock for "2024 Youth Positive Prevention Program Services." We identified this as a prospect for Count Up because the target population listed within the first RFP included "Little Rock residents ages 6-12 who would benefit most from individual attention in tutoring, reading and math comprehension..." The second RFP was similar but for the 13-18 age group. On January 30, we learned that both our requests for funding (for both age groups) were endorsed by the Commission on Children, Youth and Families and recommended for approval by the City Board. On February 6, the LR City Board authorized the City Manager to enter into contracts with CALS (along with four other organizations). The next step will be a negotiation process with the City of Little Rock's Department of Community Programs. After everything is mutually agreed upon, we expect to enter into a contract with the City to fund our math tutoring program. We requested \$30,915 for serving the age group of kids 13-18, and \$67,362 for the younger age group. The total needed to fund Count Up – largely to support salary expenses for the program coordinator and math tutors – was divided and prorated based on the average number of kids Count Up serves in those two age groups.

We are also working to fundraise for the 2024 Six Bridges Book Festival; our contributed income goal for the program this year is approximately \$115,000. We are working now to secure sponsor commitments, and two weeks ago we confirmed a headlining author to appear at a ticketed fundraising event on September 29, 2024, at Ron Robinson Theater. (We will share more about this event soon – but for now we will tease that the author is a #1 New York Times

bestseller, award winner, and writer of novels, essays, and children's books.) The fundraiser will be on the last evening of the festival and we hope to raise \$30,000 from the one-night event; the proceeds will support the author stipends, flights, and hotel rooms we must pay for to make all the free festival programs possible. (Last year there were ~50 free festival programs.) If you are interested in serving on the host committee for the fundraising event, please talk to Eliza.

Six Bridges Book Festival: The 2024 Six Bridges Book Festival will be held September 23-29, 2024. Exciting plans are starting to take shape. Board member (and former English teacher!) Joyce Elliott has agreed to serve as chairperson of the festival and help us build excitement for this annual event, which seeks to connect local readers with exceptional authors and promote the joys of reading for all ages. Thank you, Joyce! The talent committee has started meeting. So far they have confirmed 12 authors including Nate Powell (a graphic novelist and Arkansas native who won the National Book Award for his collaboration with Congressman John Lewis), Kaveh Akbar (whose "incandescent first novel" received a rave review in the NYT last month), and Garrard Conley (a debut novelist from Arkansas whose memoir was adapted to a film starring Nicole Kidman). We are anticipating another standout festival.

However, you don't have to wait seven months for the festival to hear from great authors in the community. The CALS Speaker Series will host two upcoming programs: McKay Coppins, author of the NYT bestseller *Romney: A Reckoning*, will be at Ron Robinson Theater on Thursday, February 29, at 6:30pm. Tim Alberta, author of *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism*, will be at Ron Robinson Theater at 6:30pm on Thursday, May 9. Hope you can join.

Used Book Sale: The next CALS Used Book Sale will be held at 7773 Sloane Drive in Little Rock from March 7-9, 2024. If you haven't yet visited our temporary location at the Port, this would be a great opportunity to do so (and support the library by purchasing affordable books!). We will hold "preview" hours on Thursday, March 7, from 3-5pm. Recent and lifetime members of Friends of CALS and library donors have been invited to "preview" hours. The sale will be open to the public on Friday, March 8, and on Saturday, March 9, from 10am-2pm. The sales floor will be continually replenished. As usual, paperbacks are priced at \$1 and hardbacks are \$2. Proceeds from the sale will support many library programs and grants to every branch.

Volunteer Program: Volunteer Coordinator Polly Deeps recently completed an analysis of the library's volunteer program in 2023. We currently have 1,296 volunteers on file at CALS. In 2023, we had 668 volunteers donate 12,697.25 hours to the library. Some highlights from that total: We had 219 volunteers at branch locations; 136 at Used Book Sales; 109 at outreach programs; 71 at the Six Bridges Book Festival; and 43 supporting Count Up. Volunteers are critical to the functioning of our vibrant library system, and we are grateful for all of them – including our board members.

Circulation and Traffic: January brought a large jump in the number of digital checkouts, up 27% over January 2023, and up 12% over our previous record set in October 2023. It was the first time we checked out more than 100,000 digital items in a month. Digital checkouts accounted for 51% of all circulation, the highest percentage since 2020 and the pandemic.

Overall door count was down, but most of that loss can be attributed to the current closures of Main and Williams. Some branches were also down from last January, but others were up despite being closed for 2-3 days during the snow event in mid-January. The weather-related closure did not negatively affect program attendance, which was up 20% over January 2023.

Proposed Sale of the Building Next to Main: CALS lawyer is working with the owner, Tim Heiple, and his potential buyer. Under a 2015 a long-term lease agreement CALS struck with Heiple for an apartment in the building, CALS has a right of first refusal to buy the building. Our lawyers and administration do not see any need to exercise that right, but we are attempting to reduce the rental obligation of the library and clear up some other terms having to do with parking in the library's deck as a part of the sale, if it proceeds.

Act 372 Litigation Update: In *Fayetteville Public Library, et al. v. Crawford County et al.*, the Preliminary Injunction barring enforcement of Sections 1 and 5 of Act 372 of 2023 remains in effect. Two additional plaintiffs, a Crawford County 17-year-old and her mother, joined the case as plaintiffs. The Crawford County defendants filed a motion asking the judge to dismiss the claims against them, raising again arguments they made and the judge rejected last year. Attorneys for the parties are currently obtaining documents and conducting depositions in advance of the discovery deadline of April 1, 2024. Judge Brooks has set a summary judgment motion deadline of May 15, 2024, and a tentative trial in the second half of October 2024. This means that sometime in June the case will be fully briefed, and he may then enter a final ruling in the case.

Big Read: CALS is hosting a Big Read of Tommy Orange's *There There*, which will begin with a kickoff event at the Historic Arkansas Museum at 6 p.m. on March 8. We currently have more than 40 events planned, ranging from book clubs to lectures and exhibits to a live program with Orange on May 16. The Big Read is funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts through Arts Midwest and our partners include the Sequoyah National Research Center, the American Indian Center of Arkansas, and the Ottenheimer Library at UA Little Rock. A landing page with the full schedule is forthcoming.

Black History Month: This year, we began work on Black History Month by supporting our branches and programmers through assistance from Community Liaison Jessica McDaniel, other members of the outreach team, and the Communications Department. Jessica's goal was to empower the branches to use celebration and collaboration to come up with new ideas to bring cultural awareness to patrons and highlight the accomplishments and historical events that make Black History special. The outreach team assisted with the purchase of additional supplies, paying for speakers' and artists' fees for branch programs through Windgate grant funds, and worked with communications to promote in areas and various media to reach not only dedicated patrons but underserved communities and populations who might not have access or be aware of the offerings. Interactive, hands-on events did great numbers across the system, including the Black Family Expo held last Saturday at the Pankey Community Center which boasted 142 people in attendance. Upcoming events include Harmony in History - Black History Month Family Celebration on Saturday, February 24, at 10 am; Arkansas Sounds Presents: Power 92 Tribute and Family Reunion on Saturday, February 24, at 7 pm; and a screening of *Rustin* on Monday, February 26, at 6:30 pm.