

Director's Report for April 24, 2025

Main Remodeling: We are still on target for an August 1, 2025, substantial completion date.

The architects and city have come to an agreement that will permit us to place a gate and ticket dispensing/reading machine at the new entrance to the surface parking lot off of 2nd Street. This is good news. We had been concerned that there would not be ample room for this which would have required us to rely solely on the ParkMobile smart phone app to collect parking fee revenues. That system would be a challenge for us to enforce and would have made us dependent rely on the willingness of vehicle owners to voluntarily pay to park in our lot.

Other Capital Improvements: Gonzalo and his team are working on the upgrades at Fletcher now. This will be the last of the branches to receive improvements from the 2022 Capital Bond Project Funds with the exception of the Roberts Library which is discussed in more detail below.

LR Visitor Center on the CALS Campus: We have asked the Mitchell Firm to draft a lease incorporating the terms we discussed last month for the Advertising and Promotion Commission to consider. When the lawyers have it ready, I will circulate the lease for comment from anyone on the board who is interested. In the meantime, I wanted to dig a bit deeper into a couple of issues that came up in the discussion about this subject at last month's meeting. Several of you posed good questions about why the agreement with LRCVB would have them direct their \$10K annual contribution for the book festival to the CALS Foundation, rather than directly to CALS. The short answer is that we don't have to request that they do that. Almost all donations to support CALS programming go to the Foundation but in this instance it does not make any difference to the library since the money ultimately benefits CALS either way. It's also a wash as far as financial statement reporting is concerned. So we can ask that the money come straight to CALS and I'm confident that it will not matter to LRCVB.

As to questions last month about whether CALS would be wiser to apply this money to meeting our demand for books and eBooks instead of the book festival, LRCVB will have an opinion, because routing the donation to content acquisition would not align with their goals. LRCVB has supported the book festival in the past because it brings visitors to town. The objective for them with their "marketing partnership" grant program that we've participated in for three years in a row now is to promote tourism and hospitality activities in Little Rock. Accordingly, they have restricted the use of the awarded funds to promoting the festival, with an emphasis on out-of-market advertising and promotion. Obviously, the vast majority of our programs/resources are geared toward people in the service area, not tourists. The Six Bridges Book Festival by contrast appeals to both our patrons AND people from out of town. That makes it a good fit for LRCVB support. Every dollar contributed from third parties to support the book festival (and other programs) indirectly benefits the collection budget in the sense that those dollars allow us to use the dedicated tax money for buying materials to circulate that would otherwise be needed to cover program expenses picked up by the donor.

Legislation Update: On April 9, the House Committee on State Agencies declined to endorse SB 536 which would have abolished the Arkansas State library. Within about an hour after that vote, one of the members of the committee who had voiced opposition to the bill abolishing the

state library co-sponsored another bill, SB 640. This bill removes all of the current state library board members and authorizes the governor to make seven new appointments. SB 640 passed both houses quickly. It seemed like an obvious attempt to satisfy critics of the state library without abolishing it altogether. Another bill, HB 1977, also filed late in the session, sought to “create the protecting childhood innocence in libraries” act by “ensuring children’s library sections provide age-appropriate materials free of ‘sexually explicit material.’” The bill excludes sex education material from the definition of sexually explicit but requires that “sex education materials shall not be placed on open shelving within a children’s library section but may be made accessible or checked out by a child twelve (12) years of age or under upon parent or guardian request.”

HB 1977 did not receive a hearing in the committee before the legislature adjourned last week. There was some indication that the sponsor might ask to have it referred to the committee for interim study. That means that if the sponsor wants to pursue it the committee would take a deeper dive into the topic, inviting people to testify and offer input. The policy discussion, if it happens, would be a good opportunity to raise awareness among legislators and others about all that our librarians currently do to make sure that the material in our library is shelved in an age-appropriate manner. Our Board Policy 300 obligates us to “provide materials to meet the recreation and information needs and interests of our patrons and organize those materials in age-appropriate collections.” With that in mind, I have asked the appropriate people at CALS who are involved daily in selecting books and determining where to shelve them to work with our communications department to create some resources for educating legislators who are studying the subject in good faith. It is reasonable to ask how librarians take into account what material may be too explicit or otherwise inappropriate for young children. Some may not know what we do so showing them in some detail how this works and letting them meet on camera the people who conscientiously do this work will inform the future legislative process if and when a successor to HB 1977 is introduced in 2 years.

I have been on separate calls with other AR librarians and staff from both Senator John Boozman’s and Congressman French Hill’s offices to seek insight about the federal executive order of March 14, effectively shutting down the operations of the IMLS, and subsequent notices sequestering IMLS grants in three states. The Arkansas State Library had been told that its block grant, like those to WA, CA, and RI, might be pulled back. This is the funding that allows the ASL to offer affordable access to digital data for many small libraries. After some confusion, it appears that the current funding for AR, which amounts to about \$2.2M, is secure as of this hour.

Changing the Entrance at Roberts to Increase Accessibility: We have asked the architect and designer from the local firm of AMR who worked on the remodeling of Williams to come talk to the board about the possibility of making the Roberts Library more accessible. Their recommendation involves closing the doors onto Clinton Ave. and using the existing doors on Rock St. as the new primary entrance to the building. Currently the doors on that west side of the building are locked. The designer believes that, as it did with Williams, moving the public entrance to Roberts around the corner will have a positive impact on traffic flow and redirect the focus inside the doors. Doing this also addresses a longstanding concern about accessibility for patrons with mobility limitations. James Sullivan and Kate East from AMR will show you more of this Thursday.

Pigeon Abatement: While they were onsite a couple of weeks ago addressing the accessibility and redesign issues at Roberts, we also asked James and Kate to give us their professional assessment of the issues created by pigeons who have taken up residence in the many running feet of exposed steel I-beams above the NW corner of Roberts at the corner of Rock and Clinton Ave. In response to my questions about whether it was necessary to do anything about the problem James sent me a letter explaining his opinion that letting the problem persist is not a wise course. His letter is linked [here](#). I have also had strong complaints over the past year from sensible patrons over the last year, one a nearby [resident](#), and the other a “long time [user](#).” Looking at the pictures below, you can see why these individuals have concerns. The birds (mostly pigeons) sit on top of the beams or the lip of the beams. Their droppings wind up down below, on either side of the door, or splatter the windows. As you can see from the bottom two photos below, there are a lot of beams where they may perch.

Given the advice of the architect and the complaints of patrons, doing nothing to try to abate the problem would be a mistake and undermine the community and staff’s respect for CALS. Assuming that the board concludes some action is needed, the staff has come up with three possible choices for the board to weigh this week. The goal would be to reach a decision at the May meeting. Pam has outlined the three options that she and Gonzalo have found for your consideration [here](#).



Strategic Planning: Stephanie Chase, our consultant who addressed the board two months ago at Dee Brown, will be back with us virtually to walk you through the draft report she and our staff have put together since then. She will solicit board input on the draft with the goal of finalizing the report in time for your review at the May meeting.

Call Center: After considerable discussion, the administration has decided to shelve the idea of incorporating a central location in the remodeled Main library for fielding all phone calls to CALS. When conceived, the objective was to maximize the information that any patron might get in short order by having them connect to an expert on library related questions. Other libraries we had visited, notably the Tulsa, OK and Columbus, OH libraries, had adopted this model. We thought it worthy of consideration. The staff has concluded that the upside to offering this service is not as significant as I had anticipated. The number of calls the branches receive and the level of information conveyed to those patrons when they call led the staff to conclude that this was not worth the cost it would take to implement. The choice seemed easier when we considered other possible staffing needs that might be more urgent than the additional staff we would have to employ for the call center. Applying the approximately \$127,000 budgeted for a call center to sustain our one-on-one math tutoring program through the next school year (2025-2026) makes more sense than adding the central phone answering center.

Program Updates: We hosted two great events at Ron Robinson Theater earlier this month celebrating libraries, librarians, and intellectual freedom. On April 1, we previewed the upcoming PBS documentary *Free for All: The Public Library* and hosted a panel of librarians from across the state moderated by Karama. Last week as a part of the CALS Speaker Series, Louisiana librarian Amanda Jones, author of *That Librarian*, appeared as the Rabbi Ira E. Sanders Lecture to discuss the defamation and attacks she has faced since speaking out against censorship at her local public library in a community outside Baton Rouge. Both of these events drew sizeable crowds of librarians and library supporters. If you get the chance, I'd encourage you to watch the *Free for All* documentary when it airs next week on Arkansas PBS. It will be on Tuesday, April 29, at 9pm.

Although it's still springtime, our librarians and programmers are turning their attention to summer. Our annual summer learning program, renamed Summer @ CALS in 2023, is our largest program each year. Last year we had over 10,000 library patrons who participated and offered more than 1400 programs across the system. Youth Services Coordinator Amanda Orgel leads our Summer @ CALS planning, and she will be at the meeting to give a preview of this year's program.

Development: The month kicked off with Library Giving Day on April 1. The CALS Foundation encouraged donors to support their library on this annual day of giving, then celebrate by attending the *Free for All* film screening that evening. In all, we raised \$13,850 from 96 donors through the Library Giving Day campaign, most of those for unrestricted purposes. We also received a grant of \$2,440 to reimburse costs associated with the *Free for All* screening event.

On April 10, our capital campaign committee hosted a group of 40 campaign donors (and prospective donors) for a reception at the Roberts Library's Underground Gallery, along with hard hat tours of the Main Library. This event gave us an opportunity to showcase the project, thank donors, and encourage new commitments. We are getting very close to \$1M in pledges and gifts to the campaign to support the renovation of Main. We are grateful for our donors and pleased with this progress, especially considering that the first pledge to the campaign arrived only 11 months ago.

Other ongoing development projects include: grant writing and reporting to support a variety of CALS programs; outreach to secure sponsorships for the 2025 Six Bridges Book Festival and the 2025 *Día de Muertos* event; fulfilling volunteer placement needs throughout the library system; and planning for the next CALS Used Book Sale, which will be held at the port on these dates: Thursday, May 8: 2-5pm; Friday, May 9: 10am-2pm; Saturday, May 10: 10am-2pm

Communications: We are excited to welcome our new PR Specialist, Cassandra Kwarteng, who started on Monday. Cassandra brings years of experience in television news and lifestyle content, including her most recent work on THV11's *The Vine*. She is a native of Miami, FL and grew up in Dallas. You will have the chance to meet Cassandra at the meeting.

National Library Week was a success, even though we had to postpone the Rock Paper Run due to the April 5 storms. Approximately 150 people attended the National Library Week celebration at Laman Library on April 12. The Rock Paper Run has been rescheduled for May 18, and we've reopened registration to accommodate more participants. As of April 23, we have 334 registrants including eight spirits runners. Current projects include May's *Off the Shelf*. You should have received the April issue in the mail, but it's also available [online](#). We're also working to finalize the 2024 Annual Report. Community Engagement Coordinator Maria Aguilar is also working with Maumelle Library to present El Día del Niño on April 26. As we move forward, the Main Library reopening remains a top priority. Planning is underway for launch events and promotional efforts.

Circulation and Traffic: Total circulation was up 2% in March over the previous year thanks to continued growth in digital circulation, which is driven mostly by eBooks and digital audiobooks checked out from OverDrive's Libby app. At the end of March, we had 100,891 eBooks and 99,695 audiobooks in our OverDrive collection, with 5,761 digital magazines from OverDrive and 6 exclusive current magazine titles from Flipster. While OverDrive eBooks and audiobooks and Flipster titles are counted as part of our collection, we do not include OverDrive magazines, Hoopla, Freegal, or Kanopy titles in our owned or licensed collection count because we do not select those titles individually. In the past few months, we have added several new digital research resources to our collection, and those additions have improved the usage numbers, up 27% over the same month last year. After a few years of dwindling computer and laptop usage, those numbers are also trending up for now. In March, computer usage was up 10% over the same period last year.

Next Board Meeting: The next board meeting will be on May 22, 2025, at Nixon Library in Jacksonville. You should consider soon which of the three summer months you will take your vacation from meeting, as the board rules permit.