

Director's Report for May 22, 2025

Main Remodeling: Many of the new features are becoming more evident when you tour the building. From outside you can now see the scale of the new windows along the south side of the building along Second Street. This week CDI started working on reconfiguring the surface parking lot on the front of the building to accommodate additional pedestrian friendly areas. We are still banking on CDI's substantial completion date of August 1, 2025.

Changing the Entrance at Roberts to Improve Accessibility: The architects, landscape designers, and CDI had a kickoff meeting last week with Gonzalo and Pam to coordinate this work with the ongoing work around Main. Everyone agrees that the projects won't interfere with one another but will need to be done serially. We are optimistic the Roberts redesign should not disturb the large cottonwood tree that sits just southwest of the building. By next month we should have some initial drawings.

Litigation Update: The Court has granted our fee petition. In an order issued earlier today, Judge Brooks awarded the plaintiffs collectively \$442,646.49 that must be paid by the defendants. CALS's share of those fees is \$71,920. Since the library paid its lawyers from donated funds through the CALS Foundation, we will offer refunds to our donors, if the trial court's fee award is upheld on appeal.

LR Visitor Center on the CALS Campus: Our lawyers have prepared a lease reflecting the terms discussed at your March meeting. Jo is forwarding that to her contacts at the LRCVB for review. When they are finished, we will seek comments from the board before we execute the lease for the new visitor center.

CALS Right of First Refusal to Purchase 319-323 Clinton Ave: Earlier this month I received a notice that the owner of the property adjacent to our parking deck on Clinton Ave has an offer to purchase his property. Tim Heiple, the owner of this property, had an offer to buy the property last year but that sale ultimately did not close. Our right to buy the property arises out of a 2015 lease that CALS has on an apartment upstairs in the building which is also home to the Flying Saucer. This lease agreement requires Mr. Heiple to offer to sell the property to CALS for the same price he is being offered before he can sell it. This gives CALS the opportunity to prevent the sale of the property to an owner whose plans might not be compatible with CALS. The 45 day window in which CALS could decide to purchase the property for the same \$1,615,000 offered by the buyer expires on June 20, 2025, which is before your next meeting. If we don't exercise our right to buy the property by that day, but Mr. Heiple's buyer does not close on the purchase, the lease and our right to purchase the property will remain in effect. If the sale does close, then our lease obligation and the right to buy it expire. We believe the potential buyer for Mr. Heiple's property will be a reliable neighbor. The administration does not see any need to exercise CALS's right to purchase the property.

Pigeon Abatement: As you know from my email following the April meeting, based on the staff's extensive research, I am recommending that the board approve contracting with Avian Flyaway to resolve this issue. It will cost approximately \$175,000. It would be helpful to have this done before the reopening of Main in September, if possible. I've included here a summary of the staff's concerns from Glenn Whaley, branch manager of Roberts:

Those of us who have worked in the Roberts Library building since it opened in March of 2009 recognize that the rehabilitation of historic architecture presents challenges that aren't common to new, purpose-built buildings. Most of us are historians and we appreciate the historic features of the building and we like to show off the stories the building itself tells like the coffee apparatus and the copper frieze from the old Carnegie Building. We've accepted the acoustic quirks; we're familiar with smells our neighbors in the cafe sometimes share; and we've learned to keep an extra wardrobe of both warm- and cool- weather clothing at our desks so we can accommodate the variations in temperature our HVAC system presents.

But we can find no upside to the return of the pigeons. When the facade was first constructed, it was clear that pigeons were going to be a problem. We worked with a couple of different companies who tried multiple methods and who helped us finally resolve the issues.

Then came the freeway destruction. I guess our birds had relocated under the ramps and bridges but when those got torn down, they needed somewhere else to go. So they came back to Roberts, where there hadn't been an active need for discouragement in several years. Since it was during the pandemic, there weren't many of us in the building and there was little foot traffic on Clinton Avenue to make us as conscious of the mess as we might have been. The problem went untreated and now it's a full-on infestation.

The building we were once proud to brag about and the features like the soaring lobby glass with the Batesville sandstone that were so distinctive became an embarrassment. We know the feces gets tracked into the lobby and the first floor; those of us who sit in the front lobby can watch people walk by with expressions of disgust. It looks terrible for the struggling River Market District, uninviting for CALS, and more than unpleasant to walk through, under, and past on our way into our workplace. It leaves the appearance of neglect and misplaced priorities

Here is a [story](#) that ran in today's ADG about the pigeon issue. The reporter asked to meet with us last week and brought along a videographer from the paper. Her [video](#) accompanied the story. The newspaper's drone captures the scene and the magnitude of the pigeon population at Roberts. The ADG video also contains narration from Glenn, Gonzalo, and Pam about the history of this challenge.

Librarian of Congress: Last week, after conferring with Karama, I added CALS to a list of institutions voicing concern to the abrupt firing by the White House of the Librarian of Congress, Dr. Carla Hayden, on May 9. Here's that [statement](#). When I expressed my concerns to Congressman French Hill on May 9, he was sympathetic. French told me Hayden had done a "fine job." I knew that he brought Hayden to Little Rock in 2018, where she toured some libraries and spoke to the Downtown Rotary after the Congressman introduced her. He indicated last week that there were "behind the scenes" conversations with the White House informing them that picking an interim director for the Library of Congress "is the responsibility of the legislative branch." Here is a link to a story that ran several days later in the [NYT](#) reporting on bipartisan opposition to the termination of Hayden who is "highly regarded by lawmakers," according to the story. You can also read CALS's initial response [here](#).

Strategic Planning: Karama will present the plan in final form for your consideration. Last week I circulated by email the latest version with some small edits from the version you had in April. The staff added a short introduction that you will see in the final version.

Program Updates: Maumelle Library was the host for a system program in celebration of El Día del Niño on April 26. The event drew a crowd of over 150 attendees to participate in a family craft led by artist Vicente Yañez. This is the third year the annual celebration has been

hosted at Maumelle. The program receives a lot of support from Maria Aguilar, our Community Engagement Coordinator.

On May 10, the Children's Library was the host site for the third annual Naturally Arkansas: Bringing Nature to Your Yard event. CALS works with the Arkansas Master Naturalists & Native Gardeners and a variety of other partners to provide educational sessions about native plants and pollinators and invite local vendors to participate in a native plant sale. This year's event had an attendance of over 400 people and garnered positive feedback.

After a brief hiatus, we will once again be hosting an Issues that Matter program in conjunction with KUAR and the League of Women Voters of Pulaski County. The May 29 virtual program will gather educators and stakeholders to weigh in on the current debate about students' access to cell phones in school. You can register for the zoom session here: <https://events.cals.org/event/13614924>.

Last month, we ran out of time before Youth Services Coordinator Amanda Orgel was able to share info about our upcoming Summer @ CALS program. She will be highlighting those activities for us this month.

Development: The past month has brought both good news and frustrating disappointment to our development efforts. Good news first: The May CALS Used Book Sale was a success and ran smoothly. We welcomed 1,157 people and grossed more than \$17,000 during the 11 hours the sale was open on May 8-10. Our final sale at 7773 Sloane Drive will be held July 10-12, 2025. We are now regularly giving tours to prospective donors interested in supporting the renovation of the Main Library, and we are pleased to have surpassed \$1M in pledges and donations to the campaign. It is encouraging to watch donors react positively to the transformation of Main and make financial commitments to support the project. We are also working on a number of grant proposals to support other library projects, including a renewal to the City of Little Rock to continue supporting Be Mighty, and an application to the Windgate Foundation to continue funding CALS programs in 2026.

Though the Main Library fundraising project has occupied much of our energy this year, we still have a goal of raising \$123,000 for the 2025 Six Bridges Book Festival. To help us reach this goal, we plan to hold a fundraising event on the last night of the festival, hoping to repeat the success of 2024's "An Evening with Ann Patchett and Robin Preiss Glasser," which raised close to \$30,000. This year's festival fundraising event will be held on **Sunday, October 5**, where we welcome the headliner **Shelby Van Pelt**, author of popular novel *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, which has sold more than one million copies, continues to be in high demand among CALS patrons 3+ years after it was published, and is currently being adapted into a film by Netflix starring Sally Field. We will announce this event to the public and start selling tickets (\$100/each) on June 5, with all proceeds supporting the Six Bridges Book Festival. This will be the only ticketed event of the festival.

The disappointing news concerns Trump Administration cuts to federal grant programs. Many news articles have reported on the impact of these cuts nationwide. CALS has not been immune. In the August 2024 Director's Report, I shared that we were working on a proposal for the

National Telecommunications and Information Administration's (NTIA's) Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program. CALS collaborated with UAMS on this proposal. UAMS was the lead applicant, and in early January 2025 they were recommended for a \$10.7M award. CALS's share of the award would have been \$1.2M to fund and expand our digital navigator program and create telehealth access points at libraries, with the grant spread out over four years. The status of this funding has been uncertain since January as federal funding priorities have obviously shifted under the new administration's emphasis on DOGE. To my surprise, on April 8 I was assured by a senior governmental relations official at UAMS that the grant funding would in fact happen despite what was happening in Washington. Then on May 8, President Trump posted the following on Truth Social: "The Digital Equity Program is a RACIST and ILLEGAL \$2.5 BILLION DOLLAR giveaway. I am ending this IMMEDIATELY, and saving Taxpayers BILLIONS OF DOLLARS!"

Though an official notice cancelling the grant award has not been sent, our partners at UAMS have declared to CALS and its other subgrantees like the LR Chamber of Commerce that the Digital Equity Competitive Grant program is dead. This is a huge disappointment because the \$1.2M would have done a great deal of good connecting CALS patrons with resources to help them better navigate technology and access healthcare. I again reached out to our elected member of Congress to complain about the mindless wrecking of programs enacted for rural Americans and embargoing Congressionally appropriated funds that would clearly benefit libraries and Arkansans who lack internet connectivity at home. I am unaware of any public response from any of the members of our Congressional delegation to the Executive branch's declaration.

This voiding of a lawful appropriation of Congress by executive fiat followed a similar incident that negatively affected CALS's future prospects for funding. In late March (a couple of months before the end of our project term), the grant we received in 2022 from the Arkansas Department of Health through the "National Initiative to Address COVID-19 Health Disparities Among Populations at High Risk and Underserved" (funded by the CDC and supporting CALS social workers) was cancelled "as part of ongoing federal cost efficiency efforts." Fortunately, by the time the grant was cancelled, CALS had already completed our project activities and received full reimbursement of our \$393,000 award. So while this cancellation did not directly affect the library, we had been hopeful that we would receive an extension and additional funding from this grant. With the cancellation, now that certainly will not happen.

CALS has also been impacted by proposed cuts to the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. CALS received a \$15,000 grant from HumanitiesAR in fall of 2023 to fund our 2024 Six Bridges Book Festival, and despite our submitting prompt reports and reimbursement requests, HumanitiesAR has cancelled paying the final \$7,500 owed from this grant because funding from the NEH to HumanitiesAR has been terminated. (DOGE terminated virtually all NEH grants in April; as a result, in addition to cancelling grants, HumanitiesAR has had to lay off staff members.) We applied for a grant from the NEA in summer 2024 to fund this year's Six Bridges Book Festival. We were due to be notified last month but have not heard anything. President Trump has proposed eliminating the NEA, so this funding also seems unlikely to survive the current administration's "efficiency" campaign.

(Several key staff members of NEA's Literary Arts division, which oversaw the grant program we applied for and have benefitted from previously, have announced their resignations. In 2024, the Six Bridges Book Festival received \$25,000 from this grant program.) We remain cautiously optimistic that the Arkansas Arts Council will still offer Community Arts Project grants but the funding landscape for the arts is shifting quickly, which makes fundraising and budgeting especially challenging. Fortunately, the Six Bridges Book Festival also benefits from the generosity of corporate sponsors, individuals, and private foundations, and we anticipate having a successful fundraising event with Shelby Van Pelt.

Federal grants ultimately make up a small share of CALS's annual revenue; we received approximately \$2.1M in federal funds between 2020 and early 2025. Though these grants are a relatively small part of our budget, they have had a meaningful impact and sustaining these popular programs will require us to replace federal grants with private philanthropy. That's possible; but it is no easy task. I share all of these details not to wallow in pity or rail about matters beyond the library's control. I do, however, want to give you insight into how recent decisions in Washington are harming CALS and discouraging our staff who work very hard to maintain our good standing by meticulously and punctually accounting for our spending of grant funds. They will continue to do everything they can to find viable funding opportunities to supplement our property tax revenue and enhance library resources.

Communications: After the storms on April 6, the Rock Paper Run was rescheduled for May 18. Despite more storms rolling through last Sunday, we were able to host the 5K. The bad weather did impact participation—152 runners and walkers completed the course out of the 379 who registered (not including 10 spirit runners). Several staff members joined in, along with Karama, and we appreciate their support. You can view the results [here](#). Minus fees, we collected \$12,960.75 for registration and pre-order shirts, \$587 in donations, and \$619 from store purchases. We also received sponsorship total valued around \$4,750 from Little Rock Public Radio, Centennial Bank, Dr. Loren Bartole Family Foot Care, Arkansas Blue Cross and Blue Shield, and John Gaudin. We're still waiting on a few invoices, but we expect to net around \$6,000, which will be split with the North Little Rock Public Library System. Although this event wasn't intended to be a fundraiser as our focus was on community celebration and media coverage, we're pleased that we raised enough to cover expenses and put a little money in the bank. Current projects include preparing for the Juneteenth Festival at Mosaic Templars Cultural Center, as well as promotion for Summer @ CALS, the Bike Rodeo, and the Six Bridges Book Festival. Between now and September, planning for the Main Library will remain a top priority.

Circulation and Traffic: Since 2019 (the last "normal" year before COVID) digital circulation in the first 4 months of the year grew 45% compared to physical circulation, which declined by 37%. The door count at all library locations has fallen by 34% since then, even though year-over-year door count has been slowly rising. Some of that change in foot traffic may be attributed to our 2022 switch to a different style of door counting sensor, which tracks differently and more accurately than the old ones, but much of the difference was surely a consequence of a shift in the way patrons use the library. That shift had already begun before 2020 but accelerated due to the pandemic. On the other hand, year-over-year physical circulation is still declining, which

suggests that services such as programming, meeting rooms, and space to work and hang out are important to current patrons.

Next Board Meeting: The date of your next board meeting will be subject to your decision about which of the three months you will take your CALS summer meeting break. Whatever you decide, we can host the next meeting at the Cox Building so you can get a glimpse of the new space and if you're interested, CDI can give you a tour.