

## **Director's Report for December 11, 2025**

**Ongoing improvements:** The only remaining capital improvement projects are the upgrades to the Roberts Library. The largest piece of that is moving the entrance and adding a new accessibility ramp on the west side of the library. This was discussed in the April board meeting with our architects and addressed in the budget memo prepared for your consideration of the 2026 budget this week. The ramp is more expensive than anticipated but sorely needed. In the event that our application for a state Economic Development grant is not awarded, we will fund this from our available resources. Jo has a plan for that. We are awaiting the final design drawings from AMR to give to the contractor, CDI. Based on what we know, this will cost no more than \$773,000. The work inside the library to reconfigure the west gallery will be considerably less expensive, but we don't yet know a precise number there. The objective is to convert the gallery space into an exhibit space featuring content from our special collection highlighted by interactive exhibit hardware we are purchasing. Glenn, Brian, and Guy have plans for that. We hope that this work can all be completed by the end of the second quarter of 2026.

**The New CVB Experience Center:** The lease of Concordia Hall to the CVB has now been executed. They have hired CDI to do their work which will save CVB and CALS some money since our Roberts project (inside and outside) can be coupled with the CVB Experience Center remodeling of Concordia for purposes of construction management by the contractor. CALS and CVB have positive histories with CDI (they renovated the Robinson Center for CVB several years ago). CVB anticipates their work will begin in January, and they hope to conclude it by May. Ideally, they would open along with our renovated Roberts at about the same time. We would like to get our new used bookstore that will be sandwiched between Roberts and the Experience Center opened before then if at all possible. Lily and Gonzalo met this week with a skilled and experienced local woodworker who is willing to volunteer his time helping make shelves that give the space charm and warmth. I am confident this space will be the nicest used bookstore in Arkansas.

**Rededication of "Icarus and Daedalus" sculpture:** I previously reported that the public art donated to CALS in the 1960s by Little Rock business leader Raymond Rebsamen was being relocated to the east side of the surface parking lot after gracing the courtyard on the corner of 2<sup>nd</sup> St. and Cumberland since CALS opened Main in 1997. Prior to that, it was outside the library on Louisiana Street. During the renovation, Gonzalo stored the art for safe keeping. Icarus and Daedalus needed a new site to make way for children's outdoor programming in the courtyard. At the board meeting we will devote a few minutes to the history of this fine piece of art and celebrate, with Mr. Rebsamen's family, its continued presence on the CALS campus.

**Progress on Park Space:** With the support of City Director Kathy Webb and the Arkansas Highway Commission that owns the property, I am still working to get a green light from the city to raise funds for use in converting the vacant lot across Second Street from the renovated library into a functioning park for our staff and patrons. This would complement our new renovation and benefit everyone who lives, works, and visits downtown Little Rock. CALS' lawyer submitted a short resolution to the LR City Attorney on November 4. The resolution says that the city supports efforts by CALS and others to raise funds that could be used next spring/summer to improve the space by adding some shade trees, pathways, and pollinator gardens on either end of

the area running about 600 ft. between Cumberland on the West and River Market Ave. on the east. Here is a [link](#) to John Brummett's column this week on the issue.

**AR PBS Segment with Senator Dan Sullivan:** Early in 2025, I contacted Professor Rob Steinbuch after he had written another column in *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* criticizing CALS. I asked him to meet for coffee so we might discuss some of the library issues he had questioned in his columns. I am happy to report that Rob and I have had half a dozen friendly meetings since then. I invited him to do a presentation on the Arkansas Freedom of Information Act at the Fletcher Library several months ago that was entertaining, informative, and well attended. In September I suggested to Rob that he bring state Senator Dan Sullivan to one of our meetings. Dan Sullivan accepted that offer and subsequently arranged for Arkansas PBS to videotape Sen. Sullivan and me walking around in our Martin Children's Center talking about the importance of early childhood literacy. Last month Rob, Dan, and I appeared on an episode of *Arkansas Week* taped at the AR PBS studio in Conway. We talked about public libraries, programming, and some of the issues surrounding Sen. Sullivan's ACT 372 that CALS and others challenged in federal court in 2023. Dan and I didn't change each other's minds on that law, but we modeled how people on opposite sides of this controversy could have a calm conversation about our differences. The new executive director of AR PBS, Carlton Wing, was interviewed by *Arkansas Business* sometime after that program aired. He cited the episode as an example of how the station was "bringing Arkansans together." Carlton described Dan's and my conversation moderated by Rob as "civil, informative, respectful, and everyone left better versed on the actual issues facing Arkansas." Here's a [link](#) to the 13 min. segment if you're interested.

**Program Updates:** In November CALS hosted Reverend Paul Brandeis Raushenbush, the president and CEO of Interfaith Alliance, for two sessions. One was a lunch time discussion with local faith leaders followed by an evening presentation at Ron Robinson Theater. In preparation for this event, CALS partnered with LifeQuest of Arkansas to present a series of sessions on Faith and Censorship featuring several local faith and thought leaders. Paul's conversation with Pastor Preston Clegg of Second Baptist Church Downtown is available on our [YouTube channel](#) and is a very affirming message for libraries and librarians.

Looking ahead to 2026, we anticipate announcing a winter/spring speaker series featuring notable authors monthly from February through May or June. For the past few years, we have been working towards featuring more visiting authors early in the year both to include authors who may not be able to attend the Six Bridges Book Festival due to scheduling and to provide continuity to the literary discourse that the festival provides throughout the year. We have two confirmed authors already and look forward to announcing the full slate in January.

**Development:** To date we have raised \$1,851,019.41 in pledges and gifts to the capital campaign. We are getting very close to passing the \$2M goal we set out for ourselves at the end of 2023. I am grateful to our capital campaign committee (including board representative Luke Underwood) for their dedicated service to this campaign over the past two years.

The regular year-end fundraising campaign (which raises money for the CALS Foundation to support ongoing library programs) is also underway and running smoothly. So far the campaign has raised \$44,409 in pledges and gifts.

Today through Saturday, we are holding our first used book sale in its new home on the first floor of Roberts Library. We are doing something a little different with this sale: the sale will be a “tabletop” sale, with books organized by category (fiction, mystery, US history, etc.), but they will not be arranged on bookshelves in alphabetical order like they typically are during our used book sales. We still need to do some work on the first floor of Roberts Library before the book sale can fully move in, but we thought community members would appreciate the opportunity to shop for affordably priced used books – even if the sale is in more of a “pop-up” format. The sale will be open from 3-5pm today (Thursday), during Second Friday Art Night tomorrow (from 5-8pm), and on Saturday from 12-4pm. Thursday’s hours are a preview for donors; Friday and Saturday are open to the public.

**Communications:** After wrapping up all activities for the Main Library Grand Reopening, Communications and Community Engagement shifted their focus to the Día de Muertos festival, led by Community Engagement Coordinator Maria Aguilar. Despite a change in venue and format, the event saw strong attendance, welcoming 824 guests to Children’s Library on Saturday, November 1.

The department is now turning its attention to 2026. The next major project is Black History Month, with Community Engagement Coordinator Jessica McDaniel leading the planning for the fourth annual Black Family Expo on February 7. More information will be shared at the next board meeting. Additionally, there will be a renewed emphasis on strengthening overall CALS branding and awareness in alignment with the goals of the strategic plan.

**Circulation and Traffic:** Despite what you may read or hear, people are still reading and listening to books. A study I saw [here](#) found a drop of more than 40% in daily reading for pleasure in the United States over the last twenty years. But that’s only part of the story. That same *NYT* essay made the case that the number of people listening to books is rising and that the format doesn’t matter. As every librarian knows, reading to children is a part of literacy. I say all of that to lead to this: once again, digital circulation is making our total circulation growth happen. While total circulation was down in September, it was up in both October and November, with year-to-date growth at 1% over 2024. Digital circulation is up 6% so far this year, while physical circulation is down 5%. OverDrive is by far the most popular provider we use, with a little over 26,000 unique users so far this year. As of December 10, we are fewer than 20,000 checkouts away from surpassing 1 million OverDrive checkouts for the year. The other digital services together do not add up to OverDrive’s totals, in either checkouts/uses or unique users.

Since Main Library reopened on September 29, the door count has surpassed that from the same time period in 2022, although we are still not up to pre-pandemic levels at Main or anywhere else. On October 4, there were 4,275 people who came through the doors of Main either to attend the grand reopening or Six Bridges Book Festival. The total door count for all of Library Square that day was 5,891, and 103 new library cards were issued. In October and November, total door count was up 36% over 2022 with October 4 included and up 18% without the October 4 totals.

**Staff Retirements:** We have two highly skilled, valuable employees who are retiring soon. **Polly Deems** has been with CALS for seven years as our very successful Volunteer Coordinator. Polly is organized, unflappable, dedicated to the library's mission and our wonderful volunteers, and has had much success expanding our volunteer program system wide in her time at the library (in a typical year, 900 volunteers give 12,000 hours of volunteer service to CALS!). Polly deserves credit for the success of our used book sales fueled by volunteers. When we hired **Rebecca Beadle** in 2019, CALS became one of two dozen libraries in the country to employ a full-time social worker. Rebecca has established new ways of thinking about what we do to serve vulnerable patrons. She has helped our staff cope every day with the range of challenges and emotions that accompany public service in a modern library. And she has expanded our capacity forging critical community partnerships with health providers. I am proud of what both of these smart, passionate women have done in their CALS careers. They have set important precedents and best practices that will guide their successors. I wish Rebecca and Polly the very best in their lives beyond CALS. Thank you, Polly and Rebecca!

**Board Retirement:** The CALS board has 13 members. This year four of those positions on the board are at the end of a three-year term. Fortunately, three of the members holding those positions are eligible under the library's bylaws to be reappointed, and they are willing to continue serving. I anticipate that Little Rock representative Luke Underwood and Pulaski County representative Dustin McDaniel will be reappointed before your January meeting. Maumelle has already reappointed Alexis Sims to another three-year term! Thank you, Mayor Norris and Maumelle City Board. And thank you three for your continued willingness to give your time and talent to CALS. Unfortunately, the person in the fourth position that is up at the end of the year, Stacey McAdoo, is not eligible to be reappointed, having served two consecutive three-year terms. Stacey has been an exemplary board member and leader. She served two years as the board president, steering the library through a couple of complicated high-profile issues in her first year. In her second year, she suffered a horrible family tragedy. I am very appreciative of her grit and dedication to CALS, and her sound advice to me. We will miss Stacey but celebrate that she made the public library stronger by her presence here since January 2020.

**New Officers:** Looking ahead to January, we will have a new board member from Little Rock to join you. At that point you will need formally to elect officers for the new year. Karama has served one year at the board president and is willing to continue in her role. Ryan Davis has been the Vice President of the board for two years, helping Stacey one year and Karama this past year. He has indicated an interest in handing off this duty to Dustin McDaniel who is willing to take up that assignment on the Board. Luke has kindly agreed to stay on for another year as the treasurer. (As the only CPA on the board, we didn't give him much room to decline.)

We are very lucky to have all four of you on this board. To all thirteen of you, who faithfully show up every month and take seriously your fiduciary and leadership responsibilities to the community and library taxpayers, I extend a great big dose of gratitude.

**Next Board Meeting:** Our first meeting of 2025 will be on **January 22, 2026**. Happy Holidays!