

Director's Report for January 22, 2026

Finishing Touches: The architects' original design specified a seamless glass in the area surrounding the entryway to the Main Library. As you know, there were production delays with the fabrication of that glass. CDI ended up placing some temporary but attractive glass in this space that was to be replaced when the permanent glass was ready. After living with the temporary glass for the better part of four months, and hearing no one complain that it didn't look worthy of the rest of the building, we have decided to forgo that upgrade. There is no expense for canceling the delayed order and the glass specified by the architect was more expensive. This decision will yield CALS a net savings of approximately \$200K. It will also avoid the disruption that would have occurred sometime this spring while CDI changed out the glass. The savings from this decision will be applied to other as of yet unbilled/unpaid items.

Progress on Park Space Across from Main: City Director Kathy Webb was able to get the library's proposed resolution adopted by the LR City Board at its December 16, 2025 meeting. That resolution expressed the City's support for efforts by the CALS Foundation to raise funds for converting the vacant lot across Second Street from Main into a functioning park. After the ADG reported on the adoption of that resolution [here](#) some people have donated to support this effort. Director Webb herself has donated \$2,500 to the cause. I will be asking for donations from other individuals and organizations that might have an interest in seeing these improvements happen this year. The city consultants anticipate that they will have construction drawings for Phase 0 of the 30 Crossing Park ready by March, and they say that work might begin by the end of the summer. What we are trying to do across from CALS would precede work on Phase 0 which encompasses a larger area. CALS staff and volunteers will coordinate with the city and their consultants about specific improvements we propose to make this spring and summer. If the consultants agree that what we want to do is compatible with Phase 0, then the funds we have raised would pay for pedestrian pathways, a couple of concrete programming pads with electrical outlets our staff could use, trees for shade, and pollinator gardens. The rough budget prepared by a downtown resident helping us is less than the \$150,000 I have told people we must raise. I am in the process of recruiting support from the Historic Arkansas Museum, the Museum of Discovery, the Downtown Little Rock Partnership, The Clinton School for Public Service, and the UALR Center for Arkansas History and Culture (located in the Roberts Library).

Program Updates: This week we are announcing the 2026 CALS Speaker Series. For the past few years, we have been putting more emphasis on bringing in a few authors in the winter/spring to balance the robust line-up we are able to offer in the fall as a part of the Six Bridges Book Festival. This year, we are highlighting four authors who will appear at Ron Robinson Theater February through May. Best-selling author and Arkansas native ReShonda Tate will make a stop in Little Rock as part of her national book tour for her latest novel *With Love from Harlem* which explores the life of Harlem jazz performer Hazel Scott. In March, we will host rare book specialist Rebecca Romney, author of *Jane Austen's Bookshelf*. In April, poet Ross Gay will visit us as a part of our Big Read Grant for his poetry collection *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude*. His appearance is in partnership with *The Oxford American*. As with our previous Big Read projects, we will give away copies of the book and host several book discussions, workshops, and related programs centered around the themes from the book. In May, journalist Richard Kreitner will be

here to discuss his book *Fear No Pharaoh: American Jews, the Civil War, and the Fight to End Slavery*. Find more info on the Speaker Series events [here](#).

We are the recipients of a small grant from Independent Lens to screen four documentaries and connected discussions this year. You may recall that last April, we were able to screen a documentary about libraries called *Free for All*, followed by a panel discussion with three Arkansas library leaders. This year's film series is through the same organization. We will host the first of this series on February 10 at Ron Robinson Theater. The film *The Librarians* looks at how challenges and restrictions of library content affect communities, and we will host a panel discussion following the screening. The remaining three documentaries covered by the grant will be screened March through May.

February is always an exciting month for programs with events celebrating Black History Month, Valentine's Day, and most years Mardi Gras. Asking each of our branches to plan events or book displays celebrating Black History Month has been a programming emphasis for the past several years, and this year's slate of programs feature book discussions, artwork, culinary explorations, and trivia among other events. A list of these programs can be found [here](#) (with more being added in the next week). This year early voting for the March primary election also begins in February, so a few of our locations will experience some gaps in their regular program offerings because the Election Commission is utilizing some of our meeting rooms and programming spaces for early voting sites. Some branches will offer book displays, passive programs, or grab-and-go kits to help offset the gaps in programming that arise with our branches hosting early voting.

Main Library Tours: In the final months of the Main Library renovation and since reopening last fall, the Development staff and others led dozens of tours. Through this process we learned that guided tours of the Main Library offer an excellent platform for sharing about the library's programs, resources, and impact in an engaging way. Plus, it's just fun for people to learn about all the amenities their Main Library has to offer. We also hear from patrons what draws and excites them about their library. Starting **February 4**, we will start offering monthly tours of Main that are open to the public. The tours will run on the first Wednesday of every month from 10:45-11:45am. To learn more and register for a tour, visit <https://cals.org/tours>. We hope you'll help spread the word to anyone in your network who might enjoy going "behind the scenes" on a tour of the library! Thanks to Eliza Borné and Hannah Saulters for leading this new initiative, which connects nicely with the Raising Awareness Goal of the new Strategic Plan.

Strategic Plan Implementation: Speaking of the plan, as the new year gets underway, we have created a group consisting of senior leadership who are focusing on the work being done under the plan. The Strategic Plan Advisory Committee will make sure we have adequate resources allocated for the various tasks and enable us to track progress. We will be using a tool called Envisio for tracking plan progress as well as our usage statistics and analytics data. That tool will go live in a few months and will be available to the public and to staff.

Development: Thanks to the generosity of our donors and CALS's high-quality resources, programs, and facilities that attract passionate support, we are starting 2026 celebrating a

successful year in fundraising. All told, the CALS Foundation received approximately \$2.1M in donations, gifts, and grants in 2025 (that total does not include investment income).

We have now received 320 pledges and gifts totaling \$1,863,015.41 toward our Main Library capital campaign. It took us about a year and a half to raise that total. We met our matching goal at the end of 2025 and expect to receive our \$250,000 challenge grant payment from the Windgate Foundation before the end of January. That means our capital campaign total raised is now \$2,113,015.41. We expect to be collecting pledge payments for the next four years. Though we have met our campaign goal of \$2 million, Eliza and I will continue to encourage gifts to the capital campaign throughout this year. I believe there are opportunities still out there. The momentum of the reopening and capital campaign may inspire some others to donate.

The CALS Foundation also had a successful year-end fundraising campaign. We mailed one letter and one postcard to donors and deployed a number of emails and social media posts. Our goal was to raise \$80,000, and we raised \$125,117.44. Thanks to Linda Ellis for managing the year-end fundraising campaign. On December 24, the CALS Foundation received an unrestricted planned gift of \$275,171.99.

Community Assistance Grant Program: As you recall, at the July board meeting you authorized CALS to apply for AEDC's Community Assistance Grant Program. We applied for about \$600,000 to help fund the accessibility improvements at Roberts Library. On December 19, we learned that we were not selected to receive this grant. According to Governor Sanders' [press release](#) announcing the grant recipients, 553 applicants requested more than \$319 million in total. Only \$15 million was allocated for the grant program, and only 40 organizations were selected to receive a grant. The news was disappointing, but we recognize that competition was very steep. We will find other means of funding the needed Roberts Library improvements.

Volunteer Program: Our system-wide Volunteer Coordinator Polly Deems retired on December 31. Mattie Thacker started in this role on January 12. She will be attending the meeting on Thursday. If you are a regular at the theater, you might recognize Mattie from her previous role as a clerk at Ron Robinson Theater, where she worked while taking classes toward her Master of Public Service degree from the Clinton School. Prior to beginning grad school, Mattie coordinated volunteers at UAMS and the Arkansas Rep. We are fortunate to have her in this job. Last year was busy for community members giving their time to their library. We had 722 volunteers donate 8,698.25 hours to CALS in 2025. We currently have 1,959 volunteers on file at CALS, which is a 408% increase in volunteers on file compared to 2024. We are seeing many high school students express interest in volunteering at the library to satisfy the community service hours requirement included in the LEARNS Act. Throughout the year, volunteers 14+ years of age provided service at our branch locations. Volunteers 16+ years of age provided support to programs and events such as CALS Used Book Sales, the Six Bridges Book Festival, Second Friday Art Night, and the Day of the Dead festival.

CALS Used Book Sale: We held four used book sales in 2025. The first three were at our Port location, and the final sale was a "table-top" sale on the first floor of Roberts Library in

December. We also held five pop-up sales throughout the community. In all, the book sales generated \$55,517.21 in sales and welcomed 4,451 shoppers. Thanks to Lily Kauffman for leading the sales. This quarter, Lily turns her attention to opening Library Square Books, the used bookstore that will occupy the space at 405 President Clinton Avenue. We have had a person volunteer his considerable talents and time to help Gonzalo build bookshelves for this new store which we hope can open sometime between March and June.

Communications: This month, Communications has focused on staff—gathering feedback and assessing needs as we begin developing a marketing toolkit. The team is also finalizing plans for the fourth annual Black Family Expo, scheduled for **February 7 from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.** at the Main Library. We are currently accepting exhibitors interested in displaying their family or organization's memorabilia. Community Engagement Coordinator Jessica McDaniel will share additional details during the meeting. The communications department also began the process of upgrading the website to meet new accessibility standards by April 24.

Lastly, Communications continues to support programs and activities across the system, including ASO's "Carnival of the Animals" performance on **January 31** (originally planned as part of the Main reopening celebration); Maumelle Library's 30th anniversary celebration on **February 3**; Culture and Characters, a Black History Month program featuring children's book authors, on **February 21**; and the CALS Speaker Series.

Circulation and Traffic: We reached a new OverDrive milestone in 2025, circulating more than 1 million ebooks, audiobooks, and magazines for the first time since we launched the digital branch with OverDrive in 2009. In OverDrive alone, patrons checked out 417,334 ebooks, 501,273 audiobooks, and 119,869 digital magazines. Total circulation in our digital branch was 1,271,683, up 5% over 2024. Physical circulation was down 4% from 2024. Patrons checked out books 807,333 times and DVDs 209,473 times. We no longer circulate physical audiobooks. Door count continued to trend up in 2025, rising 5% over 2024. However, the number of visits in 2025 was down 32% from 2019. We hope to address this deficit as we work through the strategic plan, based on the clearly expressed desires of community members for more welcoming public spaces and opportunities to gather with fellow community members to learn, create, and be entertained.

Minor Revisions to the Retirement Plan: Changes in federal law now update mandatory distributions from a 457 Plan to ages 70.5, 72, 73 and 75 depending on the participants' date of birth. In addition, our 457 Plan will be amended to allow participants to make elective Roth contributions. Our instrument needs to be amended to reflect this change in tax law. Jo will have the language for your consideration at the meeting.

New Board Member: The City of Little Rock has appointed Denise Ennett to the CALS board for a 3-year term, starting January 1, 2026. Denise is a state representative serving District 80 in Little Rock. She and her family live in downtown Little Rock. As mentioned, Board Members Alexis Sims (Maumelle), Luke Underwood (LR), and Dustin McDaniel (Pulaski Co) have all been reappointed.

Next Board Meeting: Our next board meeting will be on **February 26, 2026**.