

## The Public Ought to Know: Cuts to Queens libraries not an educated decision

By Corey Bearak

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The role of the public library branch in Queens has changed considerably since I was a young student user. People of every religion, ethnicity and background use its facilities. The Queens Borough Public Library may serve only one county in New York, but it continues to gain renown as the largest-circulating system in the world.

With Mayor Michael Bloomberg poised to propose a budget modification, as required under the City Charter to keep the budget in balance, it makes sense to discuss the chronic underfunding of this wonderful resource.

Queens libraries offer much more than books and periodicals. Each serves as a multimedia center and a place of community gathering and activity. This includes poetry readings, lectures, puppet shows, adult literacy (it graduates some 600 to 700 adults from its program to address illiteracy) and English as a second language programs, as well as free use of computers that provide opportunities for online research and communication, including free e-mail. It also serves as a zero cost to the city after-school and latchkey program.

Seniors use their branch libraries. No matter the time of day I visit my local Bellerose or Glen Oaks branches, I see senior citizens as well as the books and periodicals that attract their demographic.

Our libraries operate insufficient hours of operation; this results from persistent underfunding. It remains ridiculous that most branch libraries open only during the week and remain open late (is 8 p.m. really late?) a couple of weeknights.

At a minimum, all branches must be open on weekends, and Sunday hours must be available in branches that serve a cluster of neighborhoods; otherwise, Sabbath observers may find themselves significantly shut out of branch library service. Councilman Jim Gennaro (D-Fresh Meadows) deserves much credit for Sunday hours at the Kew Gardens Hills branch as part of the restoration of library hours in the budget adopted last June.

Today's column followed a chat with community activist Marc Haken, an avid "Friend of the Library" who probably made more individual donations to the Queens Borough Public Library System than any other donor. Haken, who toils during the day as a legislative aide to Councilman David Weprin (D-Hollis), introduced a chess program at the Hollis Library. He sees the branch library as a vital component to a community's serving the wealthiest to the poorest residents. Thousands of residents live within walking distance of their nearest library branch.

The library needs to develop a scheme that allows residents to visit it on any day, morning, afternoon or evening. Most branches open later and close later on the same days of the week. Imagine getting to a library after 6 p.m. no matter what day. If the implementation requires some negotiations with the union that represents our branch librarians, I submit it is worth any new funding.

While our legislators do their parts, mayors and governors ought to provide more funds in their budgets. Our mayor needs to get over an atrocious annual act that severely impacts and really kills service when most of our kids are out from school. When mayors — no matter their politics — submit preliminary and proposed budgets with cuts in library service, the QBPL (and its sister New York and Brooklyn systems) must take immediate actions to conserve its resources.

Annually, this means fewer summer hours. By the time the Council's restoration in June takes hold, the summer is over. I long for the day the occupant on the west side of City Hall "gets it" and leaves our libraries out of budget cuts. As I have stated in previous columns, I refer any administration supporter who retorts the money does not exist to my July 3 column, which identifies plenty of resources to ensure the city delivers core services, including those pertaining to our libraries, at the level we need.

On the private donor side, the QBPL could use more corporate support. Haken opines that there is a need for corporations to adopt each of the system's 63 branches. I also recommend that our legislators do more than just direct funding for programs and services and renovations and repairs. We need our public officials to be everyday advocates and to work closely with the library system to secure corporate and other institutional support.

Our library branches offer one-stop shopping for legislators who want to get more bang for the bucks they can direct to a program or project. Why? When you fund a senior center, you get seniors to like you. When you fund a youth program, you get the parents and their children. Everyone uses the library — it aims to serve the entire community — so when you direct resources to a branch library, everyone likes you.

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