



Statement by Thomas W. Galante  
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Testimony before the City Council Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and  
International Intergroup Relations jointly with the Committee on Finance and the Select  
Committee on Libraries

Fiscal 2011 Executive Budget Hearing

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Good morning. I am Tom Galante, Chief Executive Officer of the Queens Library. I want to begin by thanking Speaker Quinn, Chairman Recchia, Chairman Van Bramer, Chairman Gentile, all of the members of these important Committees, and the entire City Council. Thank you for inviting us here today to share the impacts that the FY '11 Executive Budget, as proposed, would have on Queens Library.

But first I want to first express my sincere gratitude for the unwavering support each of you, and the entire City Council, has shown Queens Library and the Queens community over the years. You have truly recognized the essential value of the service libraries provide and have stood up again and again to defend it. We are grateful for that leadership and vision.

Unfortunately, we find ourselves here again, asking you to rise to the challenge of protecting the access New Yorkers enjoy to free, high quality public libraries.

In March, I testified before you on the FY '11 Preliminary Budget and the potentially devastating effects a cut of the magnitude proposed would have on the people of Queens. The Executive Budget proposes an even deeper cut and paints a truly grim picture.

The extent of the proposed cut is enormous - \$20.4 million of new reductions, bringing our total City cuts to \$28.3 million. This is coupled with another \$1 million in State reductions. These reductions also threaten another \$1.25 million in annual State aid, which would be lost as the City fails to meet its local maintenance of effort.

In the face of losing such a substantial portion of our funding, Queens Library would be forced to outright close community libraries for the first time ever. This would undermine our core mission and deal a crippling blow to communities who would see their libraries locked altogether. We pride ourselves not only on our circulation, which is the highest in the nation, but also on being true community hubs in every corner of the borough. Ours is a diverse borough, made of unique neighborhoods, and we tailor programming, collections and more, to the specific needs of each community. Our employees often become essential members of the communities they work in. To close any single library is to lock out an entire community of people who depend on us every day. Under the current proposal, 14 of our 62 libraries would be shuttered completely until funds to open them were restored.

Additional cuts to essential public library service under this proposal will be deep and widespread throughout the borough. We have already been forced to close 14 libraries completely on weekends. Current funding levels will also cause the closing of 33 more libraries on Saturday beginning this summer. Sunday service at all but the Central

Library is already a thing of the past. Going forward under the proposed budget, 34 community libraries would be **closed** four or five days a week (open only 2 days per week). Just 12 libraries out of 62 would be open 5 days per week. Just one would be open six days per week and only Central Library in Jamaica would offer Sunday service.

Overall, our average weekly service hours would shrink from 42 hours presently to 20 hours, taking with it the huge variety of programs and services offered. Public library service would be slashed nearly in half.

This means as many as 3,000 adults would miss out on crucial literacy classes as literacy centers would be closed more often than they are open. This means as many as 5,000 students a day would have to find somewhere else to go for homework help and a safe place after school. It could mean half as many books in the hands of Queens residents, half as many opportunities for free programs for seniors and young parents. It means 25,000 people a day could show up to their local library to find it closed.

We find ourselves today in the midst of economic times that put our very core values to the test. We know all too well that when neighborhoods and families are squeezed financially, they turn first to the public library. We know that public libraries provide critical online access for families without computers or Internet service. We know that libraries are the first line of defense against illiteracy and unemployment. We know that we are a key resource in the education of our young people. Over the course of the recession this truth has been demonstrated clearly as we have seen our usage and demand for services increase. Take a trip to Central Library on a Sunday afternoon and you will see long lines for public use computers; or to Corona on a Wednesday afternoon

when strollers clog the aisles, or to Flushing, when teenagers flood the new teen area after school.

Queens Library has strived to maximize hours of service in every community. Eighty percent of our costs are the staff needed to deliver library service. Funding cuts received each year so far include \$5 million in FY '09, \$11.5 million in FY '10, and \$28.3 million proposed for FY '11. A hiring freeze, which began in 2008, has only yielded 70 position vacancies. Despite the hiring freeze and a voluntary retirement incentive, our workforce reduction has simply not kept pace with the level of cuts we have sustained: we have seen just \$4 million savings in attrition costs over the same period that we have lost \$16.5 million in City funding.

We have no other option but to slash costs by laying off 412 employees to meet the Executive Budget funding level. Last month, we handed out hundreds of layoff notices to our dedicated staff who educate, assist and serve the community every day. If funding is not restored, this will result in gutting Queens Library of the most dedicated and talented people in the field.

In addition to librarians, clerks, custodians and other library staff, we have reduced our management staff by 27 percent. All levels of the organization have been affected by workforce reductions. We will strive to save each and every job, but the reality is that our staff reduction through attrition has not been kept pace with the budget cuts received so far.

We have already cut purchasing of the most basic library needs -- books and other materials -- by 36 percent. That represents over 200,000 items that would have been loaned dozens of times to our customers.

Despite the challenges on the table, we must confidently move forward towards a future where we continue as a national leader in the field. We remain the highest circulating library in the nation. We recently won a coveted national award in 2009 – the Library Journal’s Library of the Year Award for the breadth and depth of the library services we offer. Several other awards for our pioneering programs in delivering healthcare information to the community will be accepted next month.

Through the tremendous support of our elected officials, we are accomplishing together the expansion of libraries in Queens of historic proportions. New or expanded libraries in Glen Oaks, Far Rockaway, Elmhurst, Hunters Point, Arverne, Cambria Heights, East Elmhurst, Flushing, Kew Garden Hills, McGoldrick, Queensboro Hill, Ridgewood, Rochdale Village, Seaside, and Windsor Park, and the new the Children’s Library Discovery Center will position us to continue to serve our dynamic and growing population in the future. All totaled, over a 15-year period, new and expanded libraries have increased our footprint borough-wide by 30%.

It is a wonderful thing to celebrate new and expanded buildings. It would be a terrible injustice to have to keep these libraries locked due to lack of funding to staff them. We need funding restored to allow us to keep the jobs of our talented and dedicated staff and to keep every library open at least 5 days a week in every community.

We often note that even during the depths of the Great Depression, the vision of Andrew Carnegie remained intact and libraries remained open seven days a week to serve a population desperately in need. As the people of Queens struggle out of this recession, we must not abandon them. We need to be open at least 5 days a week to serve the 10,000 students who visit us after school to continue their education.

You have truly difficult choices before you as you weigh the services that have to be protected. It is a tremendous challenge. But I do believe, and I hope you believe, that funding public libraries is a true investment today in the city's economic future.

Thank you.