



HOUSE LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE
HB 137
OPPONENT TESTIMONY
OCTOBER 15, 2025

Chair King, Vice-Chair Kishman, Ranking Member Sims, and Members of the House Local Government Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide opponent testimony on House Bill 137 on behalf of the Cincinnati & Hamilton County Public Library (CHPL).

I am Paula Brehm-Heeger the Eva Jane Romaine Coombe Director of CHPL, which is the only Library system in Hamilton County serving over 800,000 residents, as well as Ohioans across the state. Our 41 branch locations saw over 4.1 million customer visits last year (a 17% increase over 2023) and we lent out over 19 million items. We are the 2nd largest public library in the U.S. by volumes held and our collection of digital materials is one of the largest in the country.

House Bill 137 would fundamentally alter the partnership between public libraries and the communities they serve. By allowing taxing authorities to prevent a levy from reaching the ballot, it shifts decision-making power away from voters and into the hands of a separate political entity that may not represent the community's will regarding public library service.

CHPL FUNDING

Like many of Ohio's public libraries, we rely on local levies for operating funds. About half of CHPL's funding comes from the state Public Library Fund (PLF). The other half comes from two 10-year property tax levies generously passed by Hamilton County voters in 2018 and 2023.

In the last 25 years, CHPL has placed three property tax levies on the Hamilton County ballot - one in 2009 and the two currently in effect. The 2009 5-year levy was a response to reductions in state funding during the financial crisis. That levy passed with over 73% of the vote. The 2023 levy augments operating funds and was required to meet increasing demand for CHPL services in the face of flattened state funding. The 2018 levy provides capital dollars for our 10-year Facilities Master Plan. It is important to note that public libraries **do not receive funding for facilities in the State Capital Budget.**

Facilities Master Plan (FMP)

Our Facilities Master Plan (Attachment 1), developed with input from more than 3,000 community members, charts a bold path for improving all 41 library locations—many of which are more than a century old, with an average age of 50 years. Decades of deferred maintenance

have taken their toll - several buildings have not been renovated in over 40 years and were constructed long before accessibility was a design standard.

During the Great Recession beginning in 2007, when state funding was sharply reduced, we made it a priority to maintain our high level of service at a time of critical need in the community. While that commitment ensured uninterrupted service, it also created a significant backlog of facility repairs.

Today, our focus on literacy, workforce development, and outreach to schools and seniors continues, but we must also ensure that our buildings are safe, accessible, and equipped for the future. All the improvements, which range from small strategic investments, moderate capital maintenance upgrades, to major accessibility projects and replacements, have been accomplished without the Library taking on debt. We are acting strategically, efficiently, and responsibly to modernize our facilities and deliver spaces that truly reflect our community's priorities, now and for generations to come.

Branches that have undergone improvements—20 so far—have seen dramatic increases in use, underscoring the clear return on investment in modern, welcoming facilities. Visits have surged by 32% at the Madisonville Branch, 85% at Forest Park, and an extraordinary 165% at the Corryville Branch (Attachment 2).

The impact of these investments reaches far beyond the Library, driving economic revitalization in the communities they serve. The new Forest Park Branch and adaptive re-use of former commercial properties—a vacant TJ Maxx in Deer Park and a repurposed CVS in the heart of College Hill's business district—have breathed new life into declining retail corridors. According to local development professionals, these branches have become anchors of renewal, attracting new businesses, increasing foot traffic, and strengthening community identity.

CHPL Services

CHPL prides itself on being directly responsive to community needs and priorities. We are expanding the supply of digital materials to meet the growing demand for eBooks, audiobooks, and online learning (Attachment 3); modernizing and redesigning branches to make them more accessible and welcoming; and bridging the digital divide by providing public computers, Wi-Fi, and technology assistance.

While early childhood literacy remains our most popular focus, we have expanded programs to support learning at all ages, including adult education, workforce development, and senior engagement. CHPL extends its reach beyond library walls, providing outreach to schools, nursing facilities, and communities without direct access to library services – all to meet community demand.

HB 137 threatens all we have accomplished in response to our customers. Like many public library systems across the state, our levies have consistently received strong support from

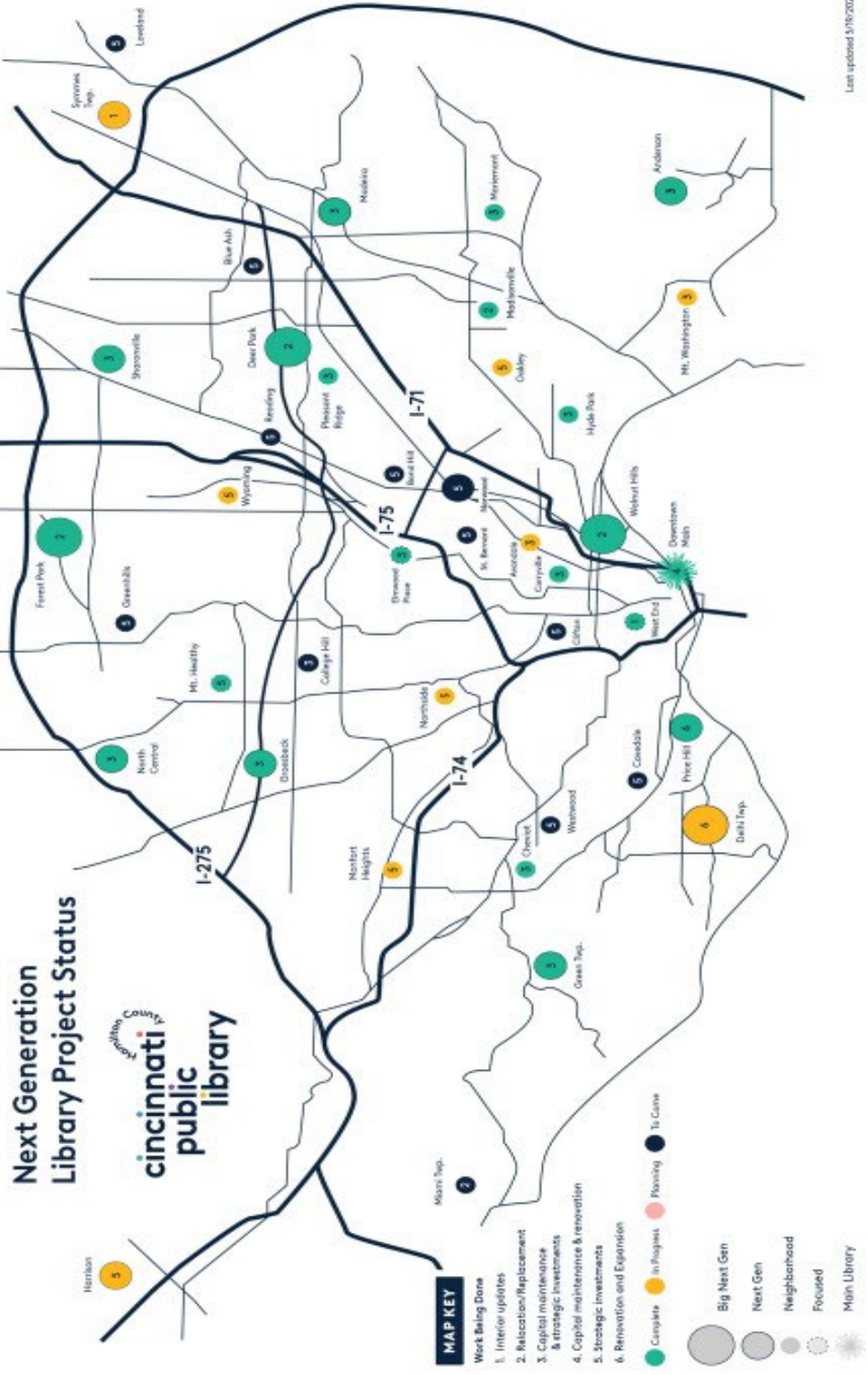
voters. Allowing members of a taxing authority, who lack meaningful insight into our financial position, day-to-day operations, or relationship with our customers, to keep a Library levy off the ballot puts our services at risk, derails our community-approved FMP, and most-importantly undermines the will and rights of Hamilton County voters.

HB 137 is an unnecessary politicization of library funding. Although our Board of Trustees is bi-partisan, they operate independently of political affiliation. As stewards of a public institution, the Trustees maintain a non-partisan stance to ensure impartiality, equitable service for all, and a focus on the community's needs. Placing a levy on the ballot is a decision made with public transparency and careful consideration - requiring the approval of at least five members of our seven-member board. Giving a political body the power to block levy requests risks turning library funding into a tool of political negotiation instead of a decision guided by community priorities.

Our numbers speak for themselves. By adapting to the needs of the people we serve, using public resources responsibly, and ensuring our locations remain essential hubs of learning and connection, CHPL, like all of Ohio's public libraries, has become one of the most used and trusted institutions in the community.

I respectfully urge this committee to reject HB 137 and preserve the right of Ohioans to decide for themselves whether to continue to invest in their public libraries.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome your questions.



Infrastructure: Increased Visits at Next Generation Branches (2024)



Forest Park

85%
more visits
than 2023



Mt Healthy

44%
more visits
than 2023



Corryville

165%
more visits
than 2023



West End

107%
more visits
than 2023



Madisonville

32%
more visits
than 2023

Circulation vs Spending: Print/Digital

- Print: Usage has remained steady
- AV: DVDs/CDs – Industry upended
- Digital: Demand increasing / greatest spend

